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TONKAWAY TOM WAS FOR A MOMENT TRANSFIXED WITH HORROR; THEN HE APPROACHED THE BED LIKE ONE FASCINATED.

OR, ROUNABOUT RUTH'S PILGRIMAGE.

A Tale of the Silver Lassoos.

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FLASH," "BOY SHADOW," "WIDE-AWAKE
LEN," "DAISY DELL," "DODGER DICK"
NOVELS, ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

COMET CITY'S MYSTERY.

ON the southern border of Colorado and in the heart of the San Juan Mountains, Comet City sprung into existence.

It thrived from the beginning, with its mixed population and the rich mines that had been dis-

covered in the vicinity, and to it came men of all stamps, eager to amass a fortune in a day.

Some of these grew rich and others died poor and were buried in the little cemetery on the mountain, from among whose graves one could look down into the valley through which ran the silvery Conejos.

One of the most noted citizens of Comet City was a man whose name and life were involved in mystery.

For want of a better name they called him Major Cypher, and he told some of the men that they could suit themselves, as that name was good enough for him. It seemed as if everything this man touched turned to gold. He was as rich as a king and lived in the finest house in Comet City, with a boy called Tonkaway Tom.

He had picked the boy up somewhere, though he never said just where, and though the youth was understood to be an Indian, it was believed that he was Major Cypher's heir, and would inherit all the immense wealth he had accumulated.

One night there came to Comet City a man who asked if there was such and such an individual in the place.

He had found his way to the Golden Gem, the boss gambler's resort, and the question was hardly out of his mouth ere half a dozen answered that he would probably find the individual at Major Cypher's residence.

The seeker for information was a splendid-looking person, of thirty-eight, with the figure of a giant, and face adorned with a dark mustache which was waxed at the ends after the manner of a western Beau Brummell.

"So you think I will find the man I want to see at the house of Major Cypher?" he queried, looking over the denizens then gathered in the place. "By the way, who is this Major Cypher?"

The whole crowd seemed thunderstruck. What, not know the most celebrated citizen in the whole region—the man whose touch made everything turn into wealth? It was simply preposterous, and the gamblers and miners were inclined to think the unknown Adonis was chaffing them.

"I never heard of him," he replied. "From the surprise you betray, the ignorance I displayed seems astonishing, but you will have to excuse me, for this citizen of yours, while well known hereabouts perhaps, is a total stranger to me."

"But from the description you give of the man you are looking for you needn't look beyond his house."

"Do you think he is the man?"

"The description fits him exactly."

The stranger twisted his mustache and walked out.

One of the sports followed him to the door and gazed after him. He saw him standing in the center of the little Plaza, which the den fronted, like a man nonplused, but suddenly, with a laugh, he started off.

The next minute Tonkaway Tom, the Indian boy, strolled into the Golden Gem, and was walking toward the tables when one of the card sharps stopped him.

"The old man's going to have a visitor. He was just here and asking about the Major."

"What was he like?" asked the boy, his eyes suddenly lighting up with eagerness.

"Tall, big and handsome."

"And he wanted to see the Major?"

"That's what he did."

In an instant the boy turned and went out.

Half an hour later the face of the young Indian reappeared at the door of the resort and then he slipped into the place.

"Did you see him, Tom?"

"He was gone or did not call at all," was the answer.

"Who was he?"

"He could not have called for I did not hear of him."

"But he wanted to see the Major very bad."

"Mebbe not so bad as he let on," grinned the boy.

The gamblers went back to their cards and the hours slipped away. They took no note of time, and when the first streaks of light appeared in the east, and the birds once more tuned their throats for a song, a terrible discovery was made.

Major Cypher had been murdered!

The discoverer was the young Indian, Tonkaway Tom, and the scene of the discovery was the house where he slept.

The red boy, slipping down-stairs to see if his master needed anything before rising, entered his room to find him sitting bolt upright in bed with a white cord lasso around his neck!

It was a terrible surprise.

Tonkaway Tom was for a moment transfixed with horror; then he approached the bed like one fascinated.

The very position of the nabob, and the staring eyes told the young red-skin that his patron and friend was lifeless, but he tried not to believe it. He touched the hands—the cheeks. All were cold. And the cruel white lasso that had done the horrible work was still firmly drawn around the throat and its long length trailed from the bed out over the floor.

Tonkaway stood there, before the bed, spell-bound at the sight. He realized that he had lost his best friend and it was some time before he recovered his composure, and could act with a cool head.

He could not understand how Major Cypher could be murdered without awakening him (Tom) nor how the assassin had entered the house. These two points were mysteries and the more he thought of them the more inexplicable they became.

He did not sound the alarm until he had made a thorough tour of the residence. He went into the major's private room and opened a door set ingeniously in the wall.

Thrusting in one of his hands, the young Indian clutched a package which he placed in his bosom and then closed the door.

"The will is safe, anyhow," said Tom. "I made sure it was here and they will find it when it is needed but not a moment before. Besides, I am going on the trail now. I swear by the Great Master above that I will not rest until I have found the hand that took Major Cypher's life. I will hunt it down like a bloodhound. I will keep the trail day and night; no matter where it leads, I will not let it escape me. He took me in when I needed a friend; he was my father in all but name, and I owe him the very life I possess. I will hunt down the hand that struck him. Tonkaway Tom will not rest until he has made clear the mystery. If he turns from the trail may the hand of the Great Father smite him dead!"

The Indian boy went down the narrow street to the Plaza. There he was surrounded by the roughs of Comet City and to them he told his terrible discovery.

Major Cypher murdered? There were not a few who said they always thought the mysterious man had enemies and that some day he would find them on his trail; they said, too, that of late several suspicious looking men had entered camp and tarried for a spell—that they had been seen to look at the house where the major lived.

Of course there was a rush to the scene of the crime and in a little while a breathless group stood in the room where the body still sat bolt upright in the bed with the fatal cord around the neck.

Tonkaway Tom looked on with them, but said nothing.

"Great heavens! look out yonder!" cried one of the miners, and the next second all were looking over his outstretched hand at the man whom it covered.

"It's the man who came in last night."

In an instant all were at the front door, and, sure enough, there stood the handsome person who had entered the Golden Gem twirling his mustache, and he was twirling it now in the light of the rising sun.

He came forward to the house, lifting his hat, which had a band of gold braid, and presently stood among the staring crowd.

He walked to where he could see Major Cypher and looked for several minutes at the white face.

"Dead, is he?" he asked.

"Murdered," was the reply from half a dozen men. "He was found dead this morning."

"Who found him?"

Tonkaway Tom, who had been watching the man closely, answered promptly:

"I found him."

The stranger turned upon the young Indian and scrutinized him from head to foot.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The eyes of the boy were seen to flash.

"The pards of Comet City don't have to ask such a question. I am Tonkaway Tom."

"Was the dead man your master?"

"He was my friend."

"Where did he pick you up?"

"He found me among my people; he brought me to Comet City and gave me a home under his roof—"

"And you thought you would pay him back?"

There was no doubting the meaning of the last words. Everybody looked at the Indian and saw how his breath went and his hands suddenly clinched at his sides. They saw his veins swell

on his forehead—noticed that he looked at the tall man a moment and then dropped his eyes.

"So you found him first?" continued the stranger. "You are the person who gave the alarm? You get up early, don't you? You don't sleep until after the sun has come up? Why didn't you give the alarm sooner?"

There was no answer.

"I say, what did you do after Major Cypher died?" the man continued. "What did you take from the hole in the wall?"

The Indian youth looked up, and suddenly pressing his hand over his heart, made a quick move toward the door, but the hand of one of the miners clutched his arm and he was detained.

CHAPTER II.

STELLA.

"You don't accuse Tonkaway Tom, do you?" asked one of the men, turning to the stranger, who was half-smiling, as he still gazed at the boy.

"I have accused no one," was the answer. "I merely wanted to know a few things, and when I pressed the young red pretty close he tried to break away. You can draw your own conclusions, gentlemen. I am the man who wanted to know last night about a certain person, and some of you directed me to this house. I came, but did not find the master in. Not wishing to be found here when he returned, I went off, but came back again."

"And saw him?"

"Yes, I saw him then. We had a long talk in this very room, and if the dead lips yonder could talk, they would tell some things that might interest you all."

"But the boy? You wanted to know what he took from the hole in the wall?"

"So I did."

"What did you find in the wall, Tom?" and Burro Bill, a stout man with little, serpent-like eyes and a bristling, red beard, came toward Tonkaway Tom and laid his big hand on his arm.

"Don't touch me with your snaky hand!" cried the boy, drawing back as far as the hand that held him would admit.

Burro Bill scowled.

"You are likely to be touched by something else besides hands," he growled. "I don't go anything on your honesty, and never did, as some of the boys know, and if you took anything from the wall you may have it on yer person now."

Tonkaway straightened and glared first at the man whom he hated, and then at the crowd in general.

"I took this, as I believe I had a right to," he said, taking from his bosom a roll, which he handed toward a man named Old Quartz, but who was not permitted to take it, as the hand of Burro Bill interfered.

"What is it?" cried a dozen voices.

"It is sealed with red wax, and looks like a will."

"It is a will—it is the one the major made and I witnessed it," answered the Indian.

"I'd like to know what right you have to it? You had no right to take it from the hole in the wall, if there's where you found it. I guess this is worth looking into. Did you see the boy take it from the wall?"

"I am not on the witness stand just now," and the wearer of the waxed mustache smiled again. "All I say now is that, with what you have seen within the last few minutes, you may draw your own conclusions. My name is Burke Sylvan, sometimes called Gold Hat, on account of the band I wear. I have no interest in this crime beyond the fact that I came to Comet City to see the man who sits dead yonder. I find him dead, and with but half of my business with him transacted. Good-morning, gentlemen. You will find me for several days at the Double Dirks."

He walked out of the house with the nonchalance of a cool head, and Burro Bill seized the opportunity to conceal the will in his own bosom.

"Did you do it? Did you kill the man who befriended you, Tom?" and Old Quartz leaned forward and caught the Indian's wrist.

Tonkaway Tom turned full upon the speaker. "Do you think I did?" he asked. "Are you against me, too? Well, I will say no more. I found Major Cypher in bed, dead, with the lasso, as you see, around his neck. I went to the wall and got the will. I did all this, but I did not know that I was watched."

"People don't do such things when they think any one sees them," sneered Burro Bill. "We will bring all this out on the trial."

"On whose trial?"

Old Quartz and Burro Bill stood face to face, the eyes of the freckled desperado as fierce as those of a tiger, and those of Old Quartz as penetrating as the orbs of an eagle.

"That's a pretty question to ask now, isn't it?" laughed Bill. "I think the boys here ought to know whose trial it will be after what they have seen and heard! Somebody's got to make the formal accusation, and as the stranger don't like to do it, not being known here, I will myself. I accuse Tonkaway Tom with having murdered Major Cypher for reasons yet unknown. That's all that need be said at present."

Burro Bill slipped from the house as soon as possible, while the Indian boy, still looking at the silent figure on the bed, moved not a muscle.

Comet City had its Tribunal like all other border towns. It was composed of the so-called "best citizens" of the place, and a man named Colonel Redband was the judge-advocate and master of the whole machinery.

Into the hands of this merciless court the Indian boy was remanded.

He crossed the room to where the judge stood and holding out his hands, said:

"These hands are red with no man's blood, but I am accused and in your power. I will speak when my time comes, and not before. I will look into the faces of the men who want my blood because I was befriended by Major Cypher, but I will do more than this."

He stopped suddenly for the finger of Old Quartz touched him lightly, and the eyes of the pair met.

They took Tonkaway Tom into the sunlight, and Colonel Redband said that he would convene the Tribunal and have the trial proceed at once. But he did not. He dilly-dallied all day, putting off the tongs of Comet City on one pretext or another, and night again threw her sable mantle over the scene.

Burke Sylvan smoked a good many cigars on the long porch of the Double Dirks. He made friends with a good many of Comet City's denizens and said that when the property of Major Cypher was sold he would try and buy the house, as he had not seen a place he liked so well as the capital of the San Juan country.

He stood on the porch with the shadows of night falling across the little Plaza and looked toward the house where lay all that was mortal of its owner.

Now and then his hand would play with the black ends of his mustache and his eyes would kindle with a light which those who saw him could not fathom.

All at once there appeared on the Plaza a figure at sight of which Gold Hat started, with evident interest.

It was a young girl of whose existence until then he seemed to have no knowledge, for he leaned forward in his eagerness and watched her as she came on with the light from the hotel falling upon her graceful figure.

She came on until she almost touched the porch, when suddenly discovering him, she stopped and fell back with a slight exclamation.

Then he saw that she was a beautiful creature with dark eyes and a fresh, supple figure and also that she had a white face and a determined look.

She mounted to the porch and turned upon him.

"Are you the man who calls himself Gold Hat?" she asked.

"I am Burke Sylvan, sometimes called Gold Hat," he answered. "If you are hunting me you need look no further. You are—"

"I am Stella," was the interruption. "I have heard all that one can bear. I know that the Indian boy who has been living with Major Cypher is accused of the murder. I don't know why he should be, for the theft of the will means nothing, in my mind. You say you saw him take it from the niche in the wall?" speaking slowly and with lawyer-like emphasis.

"Unfortunately I was a witness to that act," replied Gold Hat.

"Then you came back to the house after you went off the second time?"

"Yes. Something which I had forgotten to say to Major Cypher brought me back."

"And you saw the boy take something from the hole in the wall?"

"I saw him, but this is no place to discuss these things. I was not aware that you were an inhabitant of Comet City—"

"What?" cried the girl, interrupting him. "Come, Gold Hat, as they call you; you knew I lived here. You may tell others that you never saw me before to-night, but you must not tell me this. We are alone and will be for a few moments. I am the Indian boy's friend. If

such fellows like Burro Bill could have it their own way, the boy would have very few friends here, but the few he has will stand by him through thick and thin. Yes, you knew very well that I lived here, and, what is more, I am here to say that it is known positively, by certain parties in Comet City to-night, that Tonkaway Tom is as innocent of that terrible crime as the birds in the mountain."

Burke Sylvan looked earnestly down into the glowing face of the girl.

"The mystery of Major Cypher's taking off shall be solved and the guilty punished. It shall be known what was at the bottom of it all, and the conspirators—the hands that are joined in this work of blood of which the deed of last night is not the only crime—shall feel the avenging grip of justice!" announced the young woman incisively.

"That's all very nice and I hope your wishes may be realized," returned Gold Hat.

She seemed to lean still closer and to look deeper into his eyes.

All at once with a farewell glance she whirled and went back over the Plaza.

Gold Hat followed her with his gaze until she was gone, when he felt a hand at his sleeve.

"That was Stella, captain," observed the man there, who was Burro Bill, and his freckled face was a broad grin. "She is the Seraph of Comet City, has the softness of a dove and the grit of an eagle. What did she say?"

"She said that the right party should be brought to justice, that the killing last night was but one deed of several, and so on."

"She did, hey?" laughed Bill. "That's what she was giving you eh? I guess she's not very dangerous, especially to those who know how to take her," and with another laugh Burro Bill leaped from the porch and walked away.

CHAPTER III.

TWICE PLUNDERED.

BURRO BILL did not forget the sealed packet he had taken from the young Indian, and at the first opportunity proceeded to open it, which he did with a good deal of caution.

He retired not to the privacy of his shanty for this purpose, but made his way, like a wolf, to one of the mines that belonged to no one in particular and there, in the very heart of the drift, shut himself up in a little chamber of stone which had not echoed to the tread of man for years, struck a light and began to inquire into the find.

Bill had the keen eyes and mien of a genuine rascal, and went about his task with a good deal of eagerness.

"The boy said it was the will and that's what I want to know," he said to himself. "There may be papers of another kind in the same package and I may have some light thrown upon Major Cypher's past life."

He broke the red seals with extreme care and in such a way as not to excite suspicion that they had been disturbed; then he opened the packet.

The first thing that came in view was a bit of writing, which might be a long history, in manuscript, and then a smaller packet fell out.

The quick hand of Burro Bill snatched the latter and held it to the light.

"The big one is the story of the man's life and this is the will," he went on. "I will get the whole story and no one will be wiser for it but myself."

The smaller paper was tied and sealed in red wax like its mate, and just as Bill opened it he heard a noise which caused him to start up and half-draw his revolver.

He leaned forward and looked toward the opening by which he had entered the underground chamber.

"Throw both papers toward me!" said a voice, at sound of which Bill made out the shadowy figure of a man standing a few feet away.

He drew back with a gesture of refusal.

"Very well; you will lose them, and something more precious besides," the same voice went on, and now the red-headed thief saw a revolver covering him.

"Who are you?"

"Never mind that. I want what you hold in your hand, and if you don't submit gracefully you may never get to prove your charges against Tonkaway Tom."

Burro Bill saw that the face in the semi-gloom was half-concealed by a dark mask, that the eyes were just visible, but that the remainder of the face was not.

The freckled desperado did not like to give up what he had taken from Tonkaway Tom, but the menace of the revolver and the steadiness of

the hand that held it, were so threatening that he almost lost his breath.

"Come; no foolishness! I didn't come here to play. The papers or a hole in your head—take your choice."

With a fierce curse Bill tossed the documents toward the speaker and then felt for his own revolver.

The next instant the cavern rung with a shot; the candle that flickered near the wall was snuffed out, and the desperado found himself in the densest gloom.

"Ha! ha! you should prepare against surprises," laughed the man he could not see, and Burro, running forward, sent a bullet after the speaker only to hear him laugh again in derision.

A madder man than the tough of Comet City never stood in a cavern and cursed ill luck.

He heard for a short time the footsteps of the unknown who had robbed him, and then all was still.

"I was on the very edge of the discovery, and had the documents in my hand," he muttered. "I was about to read the will of the dead man, and to learn to whom he has given his mines, when along comes this hidden face and coolly snatches the whole secret from me! It is the coolest bit of business I ever saw, but I swear that I will find out who did it, and get even in a manner that will raise his hair. I don't propose to be plundered in this way. I am Burro Bill, and there are some men who have felt my hand. I'm a den of rattlers when I'm waked up, and woe to the fortunes of the robber who has walked off with what belonged to me!"

Burro Bill was in a quandary.

They would ask him to produce the will at the trial, and what could he say? Would they believe he had been robbed? Would they take his word for this? He doubted it.

Why not search the cavern for the robber? He might stop somewhere to look at what he had found, and then he might get back the lost documents, by a coup, which could be as successful as the one just played.

Burro Bill moved cautiously on down the long, narrow corridor.

He knew the intricacies of the cavern, and how to reach a given point within a certain time, and, spurred on with the eagerness of a panther on a scent, he pushed on, and on, until he stopped and listened.

It was the crack of a match in the dark; then he caught the outlines of a human figure.

The man who had robbed him.

Bill watched the figure for some time, and when it crept forward, and vanished, the match going out, as if the man had lighted it for the purpose of getting his bearings, the panther pursued.

He could now follow the man in the gloom, who led him a chase to the mouth of the mine. Emerging from the place, Bill kept after his prey, whose steps led toward the Plaza; and at last, to his surprise, he saw the mask discarded, and the wearer enter the hotel of the Double Dirks.

"That puzzles me," said Burro Bill, stopping short, and staring at the hotel. "That man certainly entered the Dirks, and he has my papers on his person. I shall follow, and make him give them up, because they belong to the Tribunal until after the trial."

The freckled desperado crossing the Plaza, sprang upon the porch, and slipped into the hotel in time to catch sight of a man mounting the stairway leading to the second floor.

"Gold Hat, as I'm a sinner!" cried Bill. "By Jove, this is the joke of the season," and he wanted to burst into a laugh, but prudence forbade that.

If Burke Sylvan, or Gold Hat, had robbed him he would know why, and have an explanation.

The scoundrel glided up-stairs and halted at a door on the second floor.

He bent forward and listened. A man was in the room beyond, and while he listened he heard a voice say:

"It wasn't such a trick, after all. He is a coward, at heart, and gave up the papers without much show of teeth."

"I did, did I?" grated Bill, with hands clinched in anger. "I will show you that I am not to be played with all the time," and laying his hand on the latch, he opened the door, and stood before Gold Hat, the dandy.

The man looked up astonished, and did not even try to conceal the package which he had just taken from an inside pocket.

Burro Bill's eyes saw it at once.

"It was a sleek trick, but that war no occasion for it, captain," he said, going forward.

"I thought I would look at the papers before letting the Tribunal have them—"

"The papers?"

"Why, of course. Don't you know they may be of use—that one is the will of Major Cypher and the other the story of his life?"

There was no reply.

"You've got 'em in your hand thar," Bill went on, just a little perplexed.

"What if I have?"

"You needn't to have gone to the trouble of robbing me."

"When did I rob you?"

"Why, in the mine, just awhile ago."

The face of the dandy sport was seen to whiten.

"That's a pretty bold charge," he said. "I have never been called a robber before."

"Well, it was mighty like robbery."

"What do you mean?"

Burro Bill felt a choking sensation in his throat.

"Do you mean to charge me with robbery?" demanded Gold Hat. "Are you going to say that I robbed a man of your standing? Beware! You can carry this joke a little too far."

Bill, flashing in his anger, cried:

"You don't mean to say that you aren't the man who made me deliver up certain documents in the old mine within the last hour?"

The face before him was a broad smile.

"Go out and prove it," was Gold Hat's curt retort.

"I don't intend to do anything of the kind. I only say that if you had waited awhile you could have felt the papers in your hands and that without the necessity of covering me with a revolver. I didn't intend to keep them."

"No? You were only going to see what was in them and then act accordingly?"

"I did not say so. They may want them at the trial, and when it comes to reading Major Cypher's will—"

"No will has been found! Look here," and with the documents in his hand Gold Hat approached the light and held them over the flame.

Burro Bill looked on like a person rendered spell-bound by some frightful scene. He saw the fire seize the paper, and it was creeping toward Gold Hat's hand when the corridor outside rung with a loud report and all was dark.

"The door! the door!" cried Gold Hat.

Bill sprung toward it, but was pushed aside by some one who at that instant leaped into the room and the next moment he heard the dandy cry out that a second robbery had taken place, for the last will and testament of Major Cypher, had been torn from his grasp.

CHAPTER IV. ON THE MOUNTAIN.

It is a week later.

The body of Major Cypher the Man of Mystery is moldering in the little cemetery on the mountain, and the excitement that followed his sudden taking off has in a measure subsided.

The trial of Tonkaway Tom for the murder has not taken place for the best of reasons—the absence of the prisoner!

On the very night that witnessed the events of the last chapter, Tonkaway Tom escaped, and when morning came, and Colonel Redhand, the head of the Tribunal looked for his captive, lo! the shanty where he had been left was deserted and nothing at all was to be seen of the young Indian.

In the mean time there had come back to Comet City a young man to whom Stella had told everything she knew about the thrilling affair of the murder.

This youth was the youngest mine owner in the San Juan country, and every one in Comet City knew that the couple were lovers though some could not say whether or not they had exchanged betrothal vows.

Gold Hat was still a denizen of Comet City, and in the absence of a will, as none was to be found when it came to be looked for—Burro Bill saying with the coolness of a natural born liar that the papers he had taken from Tonkaway Tom were so unimportant that he had thrown them into a sluice-way.

It was exactly a week after the murder and Stella was alone in her neat little room when the door opened slowly and she saw at the threshold the snaky eyes and red beard of Burro Bill.

The waif of Comet City had no love for the sneaking wretch, who seemed to have united his fortunes with those of Gold Hat, and when she saw him at her door she instinctively glanced toward a stand in the drawer of which lay a revolver.

"I beg your pardon, but I thought if I

knocked mebbe you wouldn't let me in," said Bill, coming forward. "I am here on such important business that it must excuse my manner of entering your room."

Stella seemed to look the scoundrel through.

"Go on," she answered stiffly.

"Well, Miss Stella, I happen to have a letter for you," and the man drew something from his pocket.

The girl held out her white hand.

"You mustn't think I'm ag'in' the red," he went on. "I admit that I thought he might have had a hand in the killing, but some things have turned up to convince me differently, and if it wasn't so, I guess I wouldn't be carrying this letter on my person."

He watched the young girl like a hawk while she opened the letter and bent forward to read it in the light.

"Where did you get this?" she asked, looking up suddenly and meeting Bill's eye.

"He gave it to me."

"Where was he?"

"On the mountain."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

Stella's eyes wandered to the letter and she read it again. It ran as follows:

"STELLA:—

"I send this by one who is our friend, no matter what sort of game he may play. I am doing all I can to unravel the mystery and have struck the trail. The bearer of this letter will make my wants known—wants which I will not put upon paper. Don't be afraid to trust him in every particular as he is our friend. I trust him and you ought to. The vow I have registered in heaven will be carried out to the letter.

Tom."

Stella folded the letter and looked again at the man who had not spoken since she began to read it.

"What does he want?" she asked. "Are you going back to him?"

"Your last question first. I am going back to him," answered Burro Bill. "Tonkaway Tom wants the map he left with you."

Stella started.

"Must he have that?" she asked.

"So he says. Mebbe you don't quite trust me, miss. I am willing to swear by all that's holy that I am the friend of both of you, and that, while I thought he might have had a hand in the killing, I am now convinced that the major's protegee is innocent."

This seemed to satisfy the young girl and she unlocked a drawer at her right hand.

Burro Bill saw her take out a small envelope, which she relieved of a bit of paper; but ere she gave it into his hands, she folded and closed it with a wax seal.

"I am going to trust you, for this letter tells me so," she went on. "This is the map he wanted. You will see that it reaches him, for to lose it might delay if not balk altogether the ends of justice."

Burro Bill took the paper and after eying it for a moment, thrust it into his bosom and touched his hat to the girl.

"Did I do right?" Stella asked herself when the door had closed upon him. "A week ago that man wanted Tonkaway Tom's blood and now he is in his employ! Could anything be stranger than this?"

In a few moments Burro Bill was under the roof of his own shanty and the paper he had received from the young girl he was holding between him and the light.

His eyes fairly glowed with desire.

"I'll bet a drove of burros that they don't rob me of this," he cried. "I know what I hold in my hand—the old map which is worth all the mines Major Cypher held at the time of his death and I got it without an effort, either."

He laughed coarsely, but did not open the paper.

"I wonder what Gold Hat would give for this?" he resumed. "I would like to see his eyes flash the moment they fell upon this bit of paper; but I will play this hand all by myself and reap the reward of the game."

Sneaking down one of the trails of the mountain at this very moment was the figure of the Indian boy known as Tonkaway Tom.

He knew that he had been searched for nearly a week by the minions of Colonel Redhand's court, that they had scoured the mountains high and low, eager to hang him by a packed Tribunal for the murder of Major Cypher, but he had eluded them all.

He knew the holes of the hills like a fox, could run from one to another whenever he liked, and was not fearful of discovery.

At last he reached a bald spur of the mountain from which he could look down into Comet

City, with its lights, many of which located the faro dens of the mountain capital.

The young Indian stood there alone, and gazed upon the scene lying at his feet.

"Not all of them are there, but the rest will come for wherever there is carrion the vultures will gather," he said in audible tones. "The main vulture is there now, and his beak is already red; the others won't be backward."

The last words had scarcely fallen from the youth's lips ere he heard the sound of hoofs, and drawing back hastily, he saw the outlines of a horse.

In another instant rein was drawn upon the very rock he had just vacated, and a voice called some one up.

"We are right over the city," the tones said. "I did not know we were so near. Old Comet City will have some new citizens by daylight, and somebody may be a little surprised."

It was a woman's voice, and the dress of the speaker was not needed to tell Tonkaway Tom this.

The Indian boy remained as immovable as the rock against which he leaned.

"There was no will they say," said the woman's companion.

"Who says so?"

"That is the common talk of the camp."

"Oh, you used your ears while you were there, did you, Javo? Well, that's what I told you to do. No will, eh? Do they think the young red took it off with him?"

"I don't know. They searched the house, but found none."

"And what are they going to do with what he left?"

"Why, a good deal of it will fall to Gold Hat."

"Just as I expected. He is a slick one," and the woman laughed.

"I guess he would like to have found a will such as he would like to have made."

"How's that, Javo?"

"Why, you see, the Seraph of the Camp—"

"Is there such a creature down yonder? Who is she? You have been there, and have seen her."

"She is the only girl in the whole outfit, and I guess that's why the call her their seraph. Gold Hat might have wanted a will to suit him, and you see if he could draw Stella into his net—"

"Do they call her Stella?" interrupted the woman.

"Yes."

"Then, come; let us hasten down. I long to enter the game, for I am capable of playing a bold and winning hand there. They would string up the red boy if he ventured back, wouldn't they?"

"Colonel Redhand's Tribunal would make short work of him, and that, you see, would settle the affair of the crime of the nabob's house."

"In the minds of some, yes; in the minds of others, no," and Tonkaway Tom saw the horses start forward again, and in a moment the pair were descending the mountain and he soon lost sight of both.

"From what I could see of her she was a handsome woman," the young Indian said aloud. "She is going down there to play her hand, whatever it may be. She has help. She has had a spy in the camp and knows that I am hunted by the Tribunal—that I am not guilty of the murder of Major Cypher. I shall see more of this woman, and now I must turn back and wait for my time to strike the first blow."

He was right. Tonkaway Tom was to see much of the creature he had just looked at; he was to learn that Roundabout Ruth was to prove an important personage in the drama of life in the San Juan Mountains, and to meet her on exciting occasions, where human life trembled in the balances of fate.

Half an hour later the rock was deserted, and there rode quietly into Comet City Roundabout Ruth and her companion.

CHAPTER V.

"AS COOL AS EVER."

THE ascendancy which Gold Hat soon obtained over the men of Comet City was remarkable.

He and Colonel Redhand of the Tribunal became fast friends, and before long the handsome man from the Southwest seemed to have the whole population under his thumb.

He was playing with the colonel and some friends in the Golden Gem, when some one came in and whispered something to the group.

The hour was late, and the whispered news seemed to excite the gamblers.

"Where are they?" asked Colonel Redhand, dropping his cards and looking up.

"At the Double Dirks."

Gold Hat arose and sauntered from the place. There was a look of anxiety on the handsome face of the sport, and as he crossed the Plaza his hand went to his revolvers and rested there a moment.

He was nearing the hotel when he was met by a man who came out and stopped at sight of him.

It was Burro Bill.

"As I live, she has come to camp," said the red-haired sport. "She is in yonder talking to Pistol Prince, who seems to be telling her all she wants to know."

Gold Hat looked a moment, and then moved on.

"She's not dangerous if you know how to take her and I guess I know," he answered with a smile. "In the bar-room, is she?" and he walked straight to the hotel, mounted the porch and entered the first open room.

There stood a woman whose face was somewhat flushed, and the moment Gold Hat crossed the threshold she caught sight of him.

The man with the gold band stopped short and returned the woman's look.

"So you have come to Comet City, have you?" said Gold Hat with a smile. "I am glad to see you after so long a parting," and he put out his hand which Roundabout Ruth took, at the same time looking him in the face as before.

She was really handsome, standing in the light of Pistol Prince's lamps. Her figure was tall but graceful, and her eyes as dark as the plumage of a raven's breast. She was well clad and the dirt on her garments told that she had ridden through the mountains and that she had not been long out of the saddle. In fact, the horse which had brought her to Comet City stood just beyond the porch.

For a moment Gold Hat looked this personage in the eye and then glanced at the man behind the counter.

"You live here?" said Roundabout Ruth.

"Yes. I find Comet City a good place for a rolling stone and I might as well live here as elsewhere."

She seemed to smile.

Gold Hat was conscious that she was looking him through, and all at once turned and walked toward the door.

Every one in the bar-room saw how her gaze followed him.

"Yes," he heard her say to the landlord Pistol Prince. "I will take the room you mentioned if there is no objection. I guess the ghost of the dead won't disturb me."

"What do you think, Captain Burke?"

Gold Hat looked at the landlord.

"You know that The Dirks ain't prepared to lodge ladies and I was saying that this one might occupy a room in Major Cypher's house if the Tribunal did not object."

"There will be no objection; I'll vouch for that," and Gold Hat walked out and the landlord ordered a man who sprung up from one corner, to conduct Roundabout Ruth to the house of the dead nabob, at the same time handing him a bunch of keys which had been in his possession ever since the tragedy.

Ten minutes later the woman who had come into the game stood in the very room where the human mystery had been murdered and the light that fell around her showed that she was the sole occupant of the place.

"He lived well, this man did," she said aloud when she had inspected the rooms. "He had all that heart could wish and yet they say that Tonkaway Tom, the boy he befriended, took his life. Nonsense!"

She threw aside the outer garment she had worn in the saddle and stood erect in another and more costly one. It fitted her figure to a fault leaving her arms full play and her movements free.

"He showed his teeth just a little, though he tried to conceal them," she went on. "He did not look for me in this camp, and I am in the habit of turning up where I am not wanted. What was that?"

She stepped from the room into a hall and listened.

In another moment a door at one end of the long, narrow corridor opened, and the figure of a man stood in the shadows.

"Come forward whoever you are!" said Roundabout Ruth, sternly, at the same time leveling a revolver at the form visible.

The man obeyed, and when he presented himself in the light she said, with a smile:

"I thought so."

Gold Hat stood before her.

Holding the weapon along her side, she looked at him, saying nothing, though it was to be seen

that he was the very man she desired to meet in that house.

"What is it? You have something to say to me," she continued.

"I have. You are to quit the camp at once." "Is that it?" and the smile seemed to grow sarcastic on the woman's face.

"At once. There is a man here who will not be restrained much longer."

"Ah?"

"Do they call him Colonel Redhand?"

Gold Hat bowed.

"You seem to know him," he went on. "He appeared to know who had come the moment word of your arrival reached him. He has sent me to you with the message."

"Is he at the head of the Tribunal of Comet City?"

"He is its moving spirit."

"Where is he now?"

"He is waiting for my return."

"What if I should refuse to obey his mandate?"

"I will not be answerable for what happens."

"Of course you will not."

A moment's silence followed the last word, and then the hand of Roundabout Ruth was lifted until it pointed at the door.

"Go back to him and say that Roundabout Ruth will not go at his bidding. He knows that I am a person of my word. Colonel Redhand, who has become your crony—"

"I—"

"Hear me through!" the voice grew sterner.

"I will not be interrupted. He is your right bower. You and this man—this master of the death Tribunal of the camp are cheek by jowl. You breathe through the same lungs, as it were, and as I know this, I am here to defy you both."

"But you are alone."

"That matters not. I am here."

Gold Hat looked at the woman as if he did not believe she was in possession of her senses.

"Here is where Major Cypher died," she resumed. "In this room the man with the lasso found him and snuffed out his life. He was to many a man of mystery; he was a mystery to one-half the camp, and the other half did no more than suspect. You have accused a young Indian, his *protégé*, of the crime. He stood for awhile under the noose of the Tribunal, and then fled."

"A confession of guilt," said Gold Hat.

"You know that is not true. You know that Tonkaway Tom is as innocent of that murder as the unborn babe. Don't try to hoodwink the woman who has known you under other circumstances. I hear that the Indian has turned ferret, that he has recorded on high a vow to sift this murder mystery to the bottom, and I shall not stand between him and his vengeance."

"I should say not," grinned Gold Hat. "You once had a mystery of your own, and you ought to know what it is to take an oath and then carry it out."

"Don't taunt me. I may be still on the trail. You know that we met once under circumstances somewhat similar to these. You know that I was driven to the saddle by a crime as dark as the one committed in this house. I am still on the trail, and now the man who calls himself Colonel Redhand sends you, his pard, to me to say that I must ride back over the trails of the mountains and out into the night without resting my weary bones in Comet City. I won't go!"

There was defiance in the tones and Gold Hat turned back without a word.

"Tell me where he is?" cried Roundabout Ruth, following him up and catching him near the end of the corridor.

"I left him at home."

"Show me where he lives."

The man's eyes sparkled.

"Come along, then. You might as well meet now as some other time."

They left the house together, and in a short time halted in front of the rather pretentious shanty occupied by Colonel Redhand. Roundabout Ruth was coolness itself.

A man came to the door when Gold Hat knocked, Colonel Redhand in shirt-sleeves.

In an instant Roundabout Ruth was inside, and facing him with outstretched hand, she cried:

"So you order me from camp? You say that if I tarry I will feel the strangling lasso of the Tribunal. I am here, not to depart till I am ready. And as for you, miserable wretch, with the blood of half a dozen people on your hands, I defy you and yours, and will kill the first man who attempts to force me from Comet City!"

This was all. As Roundabout Ruth's hand dropped to her side, she walked out.

"The same woman, and as cool as ever!" said Gold Hat.

CHAPTER VI.

ROUNABOUT RUTH'S METTLE.

THIS somewhat dramatic scene had a spectator.

At the window, and on the outside, crouched a man whose eyes fairly glittered, and on whose face was a smile of delight.

"That suits me to a T," said this eavesdropper. "I never did like Redhand, and if that woman would conclude to send a ball through him there would be few real mourners in Comet City. So he wants her to quit camp, almost before she has had time to rest. They have met before. She knows him, and he knows her, and I noticed that he did not attempt to detain her when she got through with her business with him."

Burro Bill, the speaker, watched Roundabout Ruth out of sight, and then slouched back toward his own shanty.

He had said nothing to any one concerning the map he had received from Stella, by means of the letter, supposed by the young girl to come from Tonkaway Tom, the fugitive. He had it stored away in a safe place, and whenever he thought of the trick by which he had come into possession of that letter, he laughed in his sleeve.

But there was one event which contained a good deal of mystery for Burro Bill, and that was the sudden disappearance of the package taken from Tonkaway Tom the morning after the murder of Major Cypher.

The reader will recall, that while Gold Hat was in the act of burning it, it was snatched from his hand by some one who first extinguished the light by a bullet, and afterward made his escape in the dark.

This was the event which contained so much mystery to Burro Bill, and the days which followed had thrown no light upon it.

Roundabout Ruth was molested no more that night.

She slept somewhere in the dead nabob's house, and at sunrise walked over to the Double Dirks for breakfast.

Her appearance on the Plaza occasioned some talk, and the toughs wondered what had brought her to camp.

Stella caught sight of her, and stopped as she was about to cross the Square.

"That woman has the face and figure of one I have seen in dreams," she exclaimed. "In heaven's name where did she come from?"

The waif of Comet City was in a tremble, and her emotion did not pass off until after Roundabout Ruth had vanished beyond the portal of the hotel.

Roundabout Ruth had the little table to herself, but every now and then a man would stroll into the adjoining room and look through the open door at her. She was not accompanied by the companion she called Javo on the mountain, and seemed quite alone in the lion's den.

When she had finished her meal, she went out and looked at a group of men who had assembled on the long porch.

They were rough, tall, and as strong as giants, if one judged by the wealth of limb and muscle displayed by them, and one and all touched their hats politely to Roundabout Ruth, who returned the salutation with a bow.

"Looks like a queen, eh?" whispered one of the toughs to his nearest companion.

"Whar did you ever see one?"

"Never did; but, then, I have an idea how they look," was the answer.

Roundabout Ruth stepped from the porch and walked toward the middle of the Plaza. Once she cast her eyes upward as if studying the lofty mountain that overhung Comet City, and on whose side slept the Man of Mystery—Major Cypher, the murdered nabob.

If the eye of Roundabout Ruth had been as keen as an eagle's, she might have seen the boyish figure that stood on the bare rock along the elevated trail and looked down upon the mountain capital. She might have seen that the face was dark, and the form that of an Indian's, and that it was Tonkaway Tom standing against the rock and calmly surveying the scene below.

But she did not see the red youth, nor catch the words that fell from his lips while he contemplated Comet City lying in the light of the morning sun.

Resuming her walk across the Plaza, she was about to turn into the street when she was confronted by a man who threw open the door of a house and stepped forward.

The moment he saw Roundabout Ruth, there was a craning of necks by the occupants of the

hotel porch, as if their owners expected some thing interesting.

Colonel Redhand looked at the woman with eyes which told that he had resolved on a striking scene which should not be postponed. He was sure of the men who stood at his back—the same men who carried out the sentences of the Tribunal, and now, facing the woman who had defied him the previous night, he did not fear the result.

But it startled him.

"If you keep right on," he said, "you will soon be out of camp. The horse you rode will be sent after you, and you need not come back until sent for."

"I answered you last night," was the response. "I have no other reply to give."

They were not more than ten feet apart, and the hand of Roundabout Ruth was buried among the folds of her dress.

"Yonder lies your domain; this is mine," and the bronzed hand of Redhand, after pointing toward the mountain, took in the camp with a sudden sweep.

Roundabout Ruth looked at him without a change of countenance.

"Woman, are you eager to tempt death?" he cried. "Don't you know that you can't win with the present surroundings? You must be mad."

"If I am, what made me so? Whose hand sent me out into the world, a robbed outcast?"

"Oh, don't rake up what has passed and tell it to me," broke in Redhand.

"You can't seal my lips. You haven't the power to choke off one word of mine though you are master here and wield the death lassoes of this den of lions."

Redhand executed an impatient gesture and would have passed her, but the hand half hidden came up suddenly and he looked into the muzzle of a revolver.

There was a slight commotion on the porch and the men who witnessed Roundabout Ruth's act leaned forward and several sprang to the ground.

"I ought to kill you where I stand," she went on. "I ought to scatter over this very ground the brains of the greatest villain that walks the earth. You drive me from Comet City? I would like to see you. I am here for a purpose. I find you in league with a man of your own stamp. I come in the footsteps of a crime. I find a dead man on the mountain and a boy hunted for the murder he did not commit. You know that the Indian never drew the lasso round the throat of Major Cypher. You know that the hand that did the deed is protected by the very Tribunal you rule over, and you stand there and order me from camp!"

The sole reply received by Roundabout Ruth was a look which told that so far as Redhand was concerned there would be no compromise.

He looked over her shoulders at the forms on the porch of the hotel.

"If you will not go you shall feel the force of the Tribunal," he said at last. "I will not let you remain in Comet City. Go back to the house you have taken and wait."

Roundabout Ruth stepped aside and he passed.

The look she sent after him told that she had not been beaten.

He was ten feet away toward the hotel when she spoke again.

"Give me back my child and I will agree to go."

A coarse laugh greeted her and Redhand wheeling suddenly looked at her with a malicious grin.

"Always harping about your child," he cried. "Why, vultures never care for their young, yet you pretend to have some love for the child you brought into the world."

The face of Roundabout Ruth grew suddenly white.

In an instant as it were she had bitten one of her lips through, and the hand which had dropped back to her side came up again and the head of the Tribunal looked once more into the muzzle of the six-shooter.

"Men of Comet City," she cried, so loud that all could hear, "this man was once the husband of a woman whom he first robbed of her child and then cast off. This is the wretch who drove mad as fair a girl as ever took the marriage vows and she died in a storm on the mountain. Afterward another moth came to the light and was burned. He drew into his meshes another creature whose child he stole and sent God knows where. He orders me from Comet City, saying that unless I go he will turn upon me the dogs of the Tribunal he owns. He has a friend and helper in the person of the man whose coming

to the camp was speedily followed by as dark a crime as ever stained the history of the San Juan country. He stands before you as Colonel Redhand and his pard is known as Gold Hat. There is a league of villains, and their oath—for they have taken one, and Redhand knew of Gold Hat's coming long before he came—has, in part, been carried out. All that is needed is to discover which one killed Major Cypher; but that will be found out, for an avenger is on the trail and the dark will be made light."

A derisive laugh succeeded this biting arraignment, and the figure of Redhand moved on again.

"Do you refuse to reveal the fate of my child?" she exclaimed.

"Put upon the trail the avenger you have just spoken of!"

"Do—you—refuse?"

"I do!"

The hand at the butt of the revolver seemed to tighten, and the weapon suddenly crept nearer Redhand.

All at once the morning air was shaken by a loud report, and the breathless men on the porch saw the figure of their master tremble in the sunlight and then stagger back.

As erect and immobile as a statue the woman stood on the tragic spot and looked calmly toward the toughs, who leaped helter-skelter from the porch and bounded toward her.

"I've only winged him," she said, looking over the fallen man. "The next time, unless he unseals his lips, it will be death!" and covering the foremost, she walked toward the nabob's house and not a man molested her.

CHAPTER VI.

TONKAWAY TOM'S FIRST LINK.

THERE was a wild clamor for the blood of the cool woman who had shot Colonel Redhand in the midst of his minions; but the man himself, badly wounded, shook his head and dismissed the yelling mob that surged about his door.

"I gave her something to shoot for, as you know," said Redhand to Gold Hat, who stood over him as he lay on his couch and stood the pain like a hero. "That woman has become little less than a she-wolf, and I guess if I had acted half-decent toward her she wouldn't have winged me to-day."

"That's about right, colonel, but she is dangerous yet."

"I know that."

"As dangerous as the young Indian we have driven into exile."

"Curse the young red-skin!" growled Redhand. "She boasted that he is sifting the killing of Major Cypher to the bottom, and that he will bring out all things even one of these days. I don't fear him. He is but a boy."

The exciting day had waned and the long shadows of another night were falling over the capital of the mountains.

The excitement had decreased but little, and many a dark-faced man was looking madly at the house formerly occupied by the dead nabob, whither Roundabout Ruth had gone after the shooting on the Plaza.

Some feared that she would escape during the darkness, and thus baffle them altogether.

They simply did not know the stuff of which Roundabout Ruth was made.

It was sundown when the figure of the woman emerged from the hotel and crossed the Plaza. She had taken her supper alone, and as she walked in sight of a dozen men who glared at her like so many tigers, she did not appear to take any notice of the lot.

Pistol Prince, the landlord, had told her that Redhand's wound was not of a serious character, and she had answered that she did not intend it should, remarking that she wanted to teach the desperado a lesson.

When Roundabout Ruth reached the nabob's house she went to the handsome little parlor on the left of the hall, and threw herself upon a chair.

An hour passed and she had not moved an inch. The night had come in earnest, and round about the house were dense shadows, and the night-hawk had screamed twice beyond the windows.

All at once Roundabout Ruth sprang up and moved half-way across the room. Something had startled her, and when she reached the door she touched the knob but did not turn it.

"I am not alone in this house," she said to herself. "Some one has come in within the last few minutes. I hear him now."

Revolver in hand, but with no traces of excitement on her countenance, Roundabout Ruth

slipped from the room into the hall. Her ears had not deceived her.

Suddenly she stopped and threw up her right hand.

"Come forward. I see you!" she said.

A crouching form arose in one corner and approached her.

"What, you?" cried Roundabout Ruth, bending toward the moving figure and transfixing it with her keen gaze.

"Why not? Who has a better right to come back to this house?"

Tonkaway Tom, the Indian ferret, stood before her, and Roundabout Ruth had lowered the revolver and was smiling while she looked at him.

"I have come back to find the trail," the boy continued. "I am on it now."

"On the trail of the hand that took the life of Major Cypher, the Man of Mystery?"

"Yes."

"What have you discovered?"

Tonkaway Tom drew nearer and studied her face for a moment.

"This way if you are not afraid. I am going to tell you one of Major Cypher's secrets."

She followed the red-skin with eagerness written all over her face.

Tonkaway Tom led her down the hall at the end of which he opened a door which ushered them into a long room where the red boy touched a hidden button in the wall. A concealed door swung open there, and he looked up into Roundabout Ruth's face.

"There is the trail to the first clew," he said, pointing into the chamber and they passed in.

Suddenly Tonkaway Tom pressed the floor with one heel and a sharp click was heard. Then he stooped and lifted a door in the floor, revealing a cavernous opening and a flight of steps.

Tonkaway Tom pointed down and Roundabout Ruth descended.

The door closed after the young red who followed her and they were in an underground chamber, the walls of which were as hard as stone.

The boy guide now struck a match and the leaping flame revealed a furnitureless place, which was large enough to have held one-half of the population of Comet City.

"Here is where I find the first link," said Tonkaway Tom with a faint smile. "Here they meet."

Roundabout Ruth looked at him astonished.

"Here who meet?" she asked.

"The Men of the Noose," was the reply.

"Here they met, right under the house of their victim."

"But I see no proofs."

Tonkaway Tom ran to one corner of the place and dragged to light, seemingly from the ground itself, a strange looking box which appeared heavy.

This he placed at Roundabout Ruth's feet, and she stared at it with all eyes.

"I came into the house by the way of this place," he went on. "I found in the mountain, by the merest chance, I will admit, a hidden trail which led me deeper and deeper into the earth. All at once I found that I was directly beneath a part of Comet City and what was my surprise when I discovered that I was close to the old house. You ask me how I knew this. One day I was searching the cellar for something and accidentally found a concealed door which I was afraid to open for some time. At last when I summoned all my courage to the task, I opened it and traversed a dark corridor which brought me to this very spot. There was nothing here then and I knew nothing of the trail which I had followed from the hills. But when I reached the room and discovered certain marks on the wall, I knew at once where I was."

"Did Major Cypher know anything of the hidden trail?"

"I think he did, for sometimes he vanished and I could not tell how or when he came home. He may have known of this place, but not as the meeting hall of the Men of the Noose."

"But what is in the box?"

"I will show you."

Tonkaway Tom stooped and threw back the lid of the box and Roundabout Ruth, looking down into it, uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

Coiled up in the box, like so many silvery serpents, were half a dozen lassoes.

The Indian boy watched her with a twinkle in his eyes, and did not speak until she had had her look out.

"A noose of the kind and color that took Major Cypher's life. He was killed by one of these."

"Not one of these, you say?"

Tonkaway Tom picked up one of the lassoes and held it up to the woman's gaze.

"Look! I took this from the neck of the man I loved. I know it because it was strangely woven. You see it is not like the others in make. Note how the hairs run. I never saw but one other like it, and that was long ago, and about the time Major Cypher took me into his keeping."

"Who made that other one?"

"A famous lariat-maker of my own people—an Indian named Red Buffalo. He made all his lassoes alike, and would teach no other man. One night a man—a white man—came into camp and ordered half a dozen lassoes of the kind Red Buffalo made. He paid him for them, and when they were finished took them all and rode off. That was the last we ever saw of the man, but here are the lassoes he bargained for. He wanted them for the Men of the Noose. They are in Comet City."

Roundabout Ruth listened to the strange narrative, and then took the lasso in her hand.

"If what you say is all true, Tonkaway Tom, you have the first link of the chain," she said.

"It is true, woman. Here they meet, and from this chamber the hand that killed my master and friend went to its work."

The eyes of the Indian boy glowed like coals of fire. Now the light would go almost out, and now it would leap up like lightning flashes, until Roundabout Ruth felt like falling back from the wild eyes of the young detective.

She dropped the lasso at last and laid her hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Do you know what happened to-day?"

"You winged Colonel Redhand."

"Yes."

"You did not want to kill him?"

"No. He is in league with Gold Hat."

"The man who came in the night my master was killed!" cried Tonkaway Tom.

"The same. These men understand one another, and will stand together as against the avenger of justice. But you must not strike the wrong one."

"I will not."

The boy closed the box of lassoes, and carrying it back to the corner, dropped it into the depression there.

How narrowly Roundabout Ruth watched him. How eagerly she followed every movement of his supple body, and when he rose and approached her how her eyes glowed and her face lost color!

"When the hands of this young red ferret close on the guilty, woe to him!" she muttered.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MEN OF THE NOOSE.

TONKAWAY TOM came back to the watchful woman and for a moment regarded her with interest.

"You came to Comet City for a purpose," he said at last.

"I did."

"You will not tell me though?"

Roundabout Ruth seemed to be fighting a mental battle.

"Why shouldn't I tell you everything?" she replied. "We are not enemies. Indeed, those whom you hate I hate, and they want your blood as they even thirst for mine."

The Indian youth said nothing, but folded his hands and stood erect.

"There was a time when I was not an outcast. That was years ago and I believe I was happy then. I came into this country believing that I had won for a husband a man who would be an honor to me. I did not know then that he was a desperado, but after I came with him to this wild region the mask was thrown aside and I discovered that he had had a price set upon his head and had killed more than one man as master of a camp as hard as this one. Colonel Redhand was the man I married. The daughter born to us was but a year old when she disappeared and then I was driven from home by the machinations of that man since and that time I have lived in the mountains in hopes of finding among them the trail of the lost one. We have met but once since our parting and then I turned from him and would not let him tell his roystering pards of a mining-camp that I had been his wife."

"You cannot know, Tonkaway Tom, the long trails I have followed; you will never feel the deep pangs I have felt while looking for the lost child. There were times when, confronted by dangers, I almost gave up, but something whispered that all would be well in the end and that the cloud so dark would some day have a silver lining. He knows the

truth; he knows what became of the child. I have hunted her through Indian camps and among the toughs of the mines. I have never entirely given up, though I fear the task is an endless one and that we will never stand face to face until we meet at the Judgment Bar of God.

"Why did I shoot him? All the suffering of past years rose before me and something seemed to seize my hand and to cover him with the revolver. I could not help it. But as you know I did not kill him. I could have sent the bullet through his head as well as into his shoulder, but I would not, for he still holds the secret. I don't know what Gold Hat knows about lost Lena, for Redhand may not have told him the secret, but they are pards in this game of gold and may have no secrets in common. Your trail is sure to end, mine may be endless. You have sworn to ferret out the guilty and I have vowed to find my child. You see the difference in the two vows. I became Roundabout Ruth after the crime and separation. I became the huntress of the Southwest after he disowned me, and when I entered Comet City something seemed to tell me that fate was here."

Roundabout Ruth paused, and saw the deep-set eyes of the young Indian glittering with singular light.

Tonkaway Tom held out his hand.

"While I am on the trail to avenge the death of my master, I will not forget the lost daughter," he said. "I will remember that the same hand which drove an arrow into your heart might have lifted itself against Major Cypher. But I go."

"Back to the trail?"

"Back to the track of the Men of the Noose!"

Five minutes later Roundabout Ruth was alone in the underground chamber. The form of the Indian lad had vanished and she could not find the place of his exit.

"It is most strange," she thought. "He comes and goes almost like a viewless form, but I know that he is flesh and blood, and that the Men of the Noose have an implacable foe on their track."

She turned back and re-entered the room above.

Just outside the house stood three men who were watching it with the eyes of night-hawks.

"The horses are ready, and we can enter and seize the she-eagle and be off before the alarm can be given," said one.

"I haven't heard a noise for some time. She is asleep."

"Do you know the room?"

"We can find it."

One of the three opened the door at which they stood, and all entered the nabob's house.

Roundabout Ruth heard nothing of these silent proceedings. The men had the tread of cats, and she, alone in the darkened parlor, was wondering where Tonkaway Tom would strike first, when the door opened.

In a flash she was on her feet, and her hand had half-drawn the deadly revolver, when she was covered by three six-shooters, and the dark hands of their holders were at the trigger.

She had been taken by surprise.

"Not a word!" said the foremost of the men.

"We have come for you."

"By his command?"

"Never mind."

They crossed the room, and she saw that each one was a giant and that he had merciless eyes in his head.

They gripped her with hands that seemed to have the power of steel vises, and led her forth. Out into the night they went with their prisoner, down over the trail that led to the mountain, and at last came rather suddenly upon four steeds among a lot of bushes.

They seated Roundabout Ruth upon one horse while they mounted the others, and when the signal was given all galloped away.

Though the night was still, the hoofs made no noise on the narrow trail, and Roundabout Ruth, with her hands in gyves of strong rope, could look at her captors and mark the sternness of their faces.

The ride was kept up for hours, and when the foremost horseman drew rein, they were on the mountain, with darkness beneath.

"The time has come," said the leader of the woman's captors. "We have brought you to this spot to let you decide between two fates. You will swear to ride from this place and never turn your face toward Comet City, or remain here, a feast for the winged scavengers of the skies."

It was a terrible alternative, and the face of Roundabout Ruth did not relax.

She looked from one man to another, and then down the mountain.

"Is that the choice I am to make?" she asked. "That is it."

"Then I choose," and the face of the woman seemed to light up in smiles. "I came to Comet City for a purpose, and that purpose is not yet accomplished. I will not go hence with the oath you would force from me on my lips. I will remain."

"And fight the vultures of the skies?"

"Yes."

The three men drew close together, and after awhile their heads fell apart.

"You aimed to kill to-day," said one, at last.

"I did not. I had Colonel Redhand at my mercy, and could have taken his life, but, instead, took but a little of his blood."

"Your hand trembled."

"It never was steadier."

The men did not reply.

"What, do you think I would nearly miss a man at ten paces?" cried Roundabout Ruth.

"You did not miss him, and he is now hovering between life and death."

No answer.

"There lies a country where you will not be hunted," and the speaker pointed down the mountain. "You will be safe there, and if you will go and never come back to plague us, you will be unmolested."

"Did he send you upon this mission? Is this his work?"

"It is our own. We did not consult him."

"Then you knew that I would not accept the conditions you have offered. You thought I would reject your proposals, and you were right. I spurn them!"

"Think of the child you spoke about to-day."

The woman winced.

"You struck me to the heart that time," she said. "I have centered every desire in this hunt. The loss of the little one transformed me into Roundabout Ruth. It put a revolver into my hand, and drove me upon the trail."

"Do you think Colonel Redhand knows what became of the child?"

"He stole it!"

"How long ago?"

"Seventeen years."

"If living she would be—"

"Nearly eighteen now."

Once more the toughs exchanged significant looks.

"A truce to all this; you are only torturing me!" exclaimed Roundabout Ruth. "Why don't you go on and do your worst?"

The three rode closer to her, and the hand of one fell upon her arm.

She looked at his other hand and saw there a cocked six-shooter; the barrel glittered in the starlight and almost touched her.

Slowly it came up until she could look into the dark muzzle and read doom there.

"Those who show no mercy must expect none," came over the leveled weapon. "We won't spoil your face, Roundabout Ruth, but will leave that work to the vultures. The silver lasso, Moro!"

From beneath his coat one of the three drew something white and snakelike. The moment Roundabout Ruth caught sight of it she thought of the boxful uncovered by Tonkaway Tom, in the underground chamber.

"These are the Men of the Noose," she murmured, and that same moment the white cord fell over her head and settled upon her shoulders.

Roundabout Ruth's child-hunt was about to end.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DESPERADO'S DOOM.

"I GUESS I might as well go to work and see what I've got. This is the map which I was pretty sure the young Indian took to the girl for safe-keeping, some time ago, and if I find here what I think is to be found, why, I will make the biggest stake in the whole game."

Burro Bill had retired to a secluded spot, underground, but not in the same mine where he had been robbed of the will by the man in the mask, and there he proceeded to break the seal of the map which he had drawn from Stella by means of the letter purporting to come from Tonkaway Tom.

And what did he expect to gain by the use of the map?

Rumors of buried wealth in some long-lost mine had floated about Comet City ever since its establishment, and it was said that a certain map, which held the key to the whole situation, was to be discovered in the possession of a person as yet unknown to the roughs of the mountain camp.

Burro Bill was one of the believers in the story of the mine, and his eyes had detected Tonkaway

Tom in the act of handing to Stella a little paper, which he said was a map, which he had obtained from an old man who died on one of the mountain trails. The girl was to give it up to no one except on an order from him, or to him personally.

The red-haired scoundrel of Comet City had taken advantage of this discovery, and, as we have seen, managed to get possession of the map, which he was about to use in his own interest.

It was the same night which witnessed the abduction of Roundabout Ruth by the three Vigilantes, but of this stirring incident he knew nothing.

This time Burro Bill had guarded against a surprise, for he was hemmed in by stone walls and there was no open door for the wearer of the black mask to come in at and spoil his game.

He broke the seal Stella had placed on the map and opened it.

"Just as I expected!" he exclaimed the moment he saw a lot of lines, crosses and dots. "This would puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer, but I will find out all there is in it."

He sat down in front of the light and began to study the map. It was roughly drawn and a veritable puzzle, but by and by he seemed to find the key, for his eyes suddenly lit up with joy and he chuckled to himself.

"The longer I look at it now the clearer the whole thing becomes," he cried. "I believe I can go straight to the spot where these two crosses are on the stone. I have seen a stone of this description, but never thought it might be a door to the lost bonanza."

He studied the map an hour longer and then, hiding it in his bosom, crept from the place and went up among the shanties of the camp.

Burro Bill looked about him, but saw no watchful figure.

"Why not now?" he said. "Roundabout Ruth the shooter is asleep and the boys are at the Golden Gem, gambling as usual. I couldn't find a better time and if I hesitate I may lose the whole loaf."

He proceeded to his cabin where he armed himself and then left Comet City.

Plunging into the mountain, he kept on until he found himself some miles from the camp.

At length he dodged into a narrow trail which was full of shadows and after a brief run down it, drew up in front of a huge boulder that lay alongside the path.

He had seen it before, had even rested on it, and from it looked over the surrounding landscape.

Now it had another significance in his eyes. He believed it hid the mouth of the lost mine, that he had but to uncover that mouth on the north side of the stone and drop into the mine itself.

Burro Bill went to work at once.

"It is here! By Jove, I have found it!" he exclaimed as the earth seemed to sink, and falling back, he discovered a cavernous opening.

It was dark and apparently fathomless, and the man dropped a stone into it to hear it strike almost immediately.

He had come to the place prepared to carry his explorations to an end, and a moment later he lowered himself into the dark and stood on hard ground.

Burro Bill moved down an incline and soon drew up against a wall which seemed in the dark to bear the marks of mining tools. He struck a match.

"This is it!" he cried.

Dreams of wealth floated through the tough's mind. He saw himself richer than the richest nabob in the Southwest; he would quit the country and live like a king either in San Francisco or New York, he believed in the latter city. He would not remain in Comet City where his secret was liable to be wrested from him and where he would be hunted by Tonkaway Tom as soon as the fraud he had practiced was exposed, but would get out of the young Indian's way and make himself scarce.

Burro Bill went deeper and deeper into the mine he had unearthed.

He crossed trails which no human foot had trodden for years, perhaps centuries, and brought up at last in a little chamber no larger than his own cramped quarters in camp.

"This is better than living like a dog in Comet City," he said looking about him. "I will own all this wealth myself and share it with no one."

In one corner the man found the remains of a rope ladder which had been used by the former owners of the mine to descend to a chamber below, and his curiosity instantly carried away all discretion.

He tried the ladder and found that it was strong despite its apparent age.

It hung over a wall the bottom of which he could not see even with the aid of his torch, but notwithstanding this he crawled over the edge of the wall and began to descend.

The ladder swayed, but Burro Bill held on and lowered himself hand over hand.

"It would be a serious joke if the ghosts of the old miners of this secret bonanza should cut the ladder loose and let me down suddenly," laughed Bill. "I don't know how far I would fall, but there would be a tumble sure enough, and my gold-hunting would come to an end. But ghosts don't cut ladders loose and I have found the lost bonanza."

He must have been fifty feet from the top of the wall when one of the rope rounds of the ladder suddenly parted and he almost lost his balance.

But he held on like grim death and for a moment did not move.

"I guess it was the weak one in the ladder," said he at last. "I will go to the end of this adventure or—"

He had put his foot down but it touched nothing.

"In God's name, what does this mean?" he cried.

At that instant the round he was grasping parted and he wildly clutched the rope at the side.

Burro Bill clung to the frail support with the whitest face a desperado ever had.

"I must go back!" he gasped. "The old ladder is giving out. I am too heavy for it and, then, it has been hanging here for years."

He began to climb upward again; he exercised a good deal of care for fear of testing the ladder beyond its strength, but doom had him in its grasp.

Another round broke loose under his hand and he uttered a cry which was, in fact, a shriek of horror.

The ladder was parting in half a dozen places.

"A thousand curses on my ambition!" he groaned. "Why wasn't I content to be Burro Bill and not a gold-hunter like this? I am doomed here, for the old ladder is breaking and the moment I try to make another round the whole thing will snap and I will drop to death."

He had stopped in the dark with his heart in his throat and a cold sweat on his forehead.

To move meant death and yet he could not stay there and perish of fright.

Seconds seemed hours to the man on the rope-ladder. He heard the beating of his own heart and felt the cold chill of approaching death. It was a terrible moment in the life of the bonanza-hunter.

"I've got to make another move. I can't hang here and die of sheer fright. Here goes, no matter what takes place."

He moved again and now the ladder seemed to help him. At any rate it did not break again.

But the moment he tried to draw himself up he felt the rounds part like rotten paper.

Burro Bill stopped again, this time with a gasp, and the next moment he was falling down to the death he dreaded.

The old ladder had parted without noise!

Down through the darkness that prevailed in the mine shot the body of Burro Bill.

It struck the stones below with a horrid thud and then all was still.

If some one could have carried a torch to the spot he would have seen a human figure crawling over the blood-stained ground with eyes, full of imploring, uplifted to the fringe of the wall overhead.

The man was still alive. He made the circuit of the chamber into which he had dropped; he reached a place where there seemed to be a door and in a little while had left the spot.

Drawing forth a match Burro Bill, with the last strength he ever displayed, lit the lucifer and tried to make out his surroundings.

"I deserved this. I found the mine by a trick, by robbing Stella, and here I perish, never perhaps to be found by any one!"

He threw the match from him with a curse, then tried to lift himself along the wall, but failed, and with the last cry of a desperate man sunk to the ground and rolled over dead.

For a little while the match flickered on the ground and then went out, and silence and darkness enshrouded the tomb of the bonanza-hunter.

Burro Bill had met the fate he deserved, and the game would proceed without him.

CHAPTER X.

TONKAWAY TOM'S RETURN.

THE three sports who took Roundabout Ruth into the mountain rode back to Comet City and dispersed to their shanties.

They came back unseen and seemed to possess a secret which they were unwilling to share with any one.

What had become of the huntress? Had they left her to the beaks of the vultures, or had she escaped from their clutches?

Gold Hat came down from his little room in the Double Dirks and walked out upon the porch to breathe the fresh air of another morning.

He looked toward Major Cypher's house and wondered if its supposed tenant had risen.

The sun came up over the hills and looked down upon the streets of Comet City.

The handsome sport quitted the porch and walked over to Redband's shanty for the purpose of inquiring after the wounded man's condition.

"The boy came back last night," cried Redband the moment Gold Hat's face appeared at the door.

"Not Tonkaway Tom?"

"No one else. I not only heard him, but got a look at the young red."

Gold Hat's look was a genuine surprise.

"It was after midnight and I was restless under this infernal wound. I dragged myself to the window yonder and was looking out upon the Plaza where the light from the open door of the Golden Gem lay, when all at once I saw a figure cross it and stop within a few yards of my house. It was Tonkaway Tom. There was no mistaking the form which I know so well. I tell you the young Indian was back last night."

Gold Hat said nothing for a moment.

"He did not see you at the window?" he asked at last.

"No, but I saw him all the time and had seized my revolver for the purpose of planting a dead Indian out yonder when all at once he turned and put back."

"And you saw him no more?"

"That was the last I saw of him. What brought him back heaven knows, but he no doubt is 'on the trail' as he calls it."

Gold Hat looked at the pale-faced man and then out of the window.

"He is yonder now, as I live!"

Redband almost sprung from bed.

"Tonkaway Tom?"

"Tonkaway Tom."

Sure enough both desperadoes saw the boy crossing the Plaza with the steady step of a cool-head.

He had come back, braving the dangers which he must know would meet him there, and while the two men glared at him they marveled at his courage.

They were not the only ones who had caught sight of the young red-skin.

He had been seen by one-half the camp, and there were lowering brows and evil looks as he came on, seeming to take no notice of the mad stares and tiger eyes.

Tonkaway Tom kept on until he mounted the porch of the Double Dirks, where he paused and turned upon the men of Comet City.

The boy's face was calm. He had not returned in disguise, nor had he marched unknowingly into the death snares of the mountain capital.

The toughs of Comet City moved nearer to the hotel and looked at Tonkaway Tom on the porch.

Gold Hat and Redband watched all from the latter's shanty, wondering if the ball would open, or would the Indian cow the desperadoes by his coolness?

"We will make him answer to the charge now," cried one of the men, who advanced to within a few feet of the porch and stopped to look up into the Indian's face.

Several came toward Redband's cabin, and Gold Hat turned to his partner.

"They are going to force the Indian to trial," he said. "You must have an answer for the boys who are coming for your commands. What shall it be?"

"Let them have it out with him," was the reply.

At this moment the men halted in front of the shanty, and Redband told Gold Hat to open the door.

"The young red rat has defied the camp by coming back," said one of the three.

"He dares us to take him up and try him for killing Major Cypher," chimed in another.

"Convene the court!" returned Redband.

"Now?"

"Now!"

The men fell back and returned to their companions.

Meanwhile, Tonkaway Tom had not left the porch. He was standing in the broad light of morning, and his eye, eagle-like, was looking over the crowd in his front.

One of the men who had questioned Redhand waved his hand for silence.

"Is the young Indian ready for trial?" he asked.

"Tonkaway Tom does not recognize the authority of the Tribunal of Comet City."

The crowd looked at one another and then at the red-skin.

There was something foolhardy in his refusing to recognize the court of the camp.

"Whether you recognize its authority or not, it will proceed to try you for the killing of Major Cypher. You will prepare for the trial."

Tonkaway Tom leaped from the porch and started toward the house of the crime.

"Stop him! Don't let him slope off again."

The red boy stopped.

"Tonkaway Tom is no coward. He has come back to stay; the trail led him back."

There was defiance in the eyes that regarded the mob, and the red face before it was calm and almost expressionless.

"I go to the house I used to occupy through the kind heart of Major Cypher," he went on. "You must not follow me thither."

Once more he was on his way, and the crowd, undecided for a second, fell back and let him pass on.

They saw the door shut behind him, and then the pent-up feelings of the toughs found vent in oaths and shouts for blood.

Stella, who had been a silent spectator of this scene, retreated into her own little home and stood face to face a moment later with her lover.

"The boy has thrown himself into the lion's jaws," she cried. "He has returned to die."

"That was his own lookout. I didn't think he would come back, but he told them that the trail led him home, and that he will face them when they want him."

"But the court will be 'packed.'"

"Of course. The Tribunal is always packed."

For a little while the young people looked into each other's faces, when Stella caught her lover's arm and cried:

"You must go to him. You must tell him that it is death to remain; that the rope is ready for his neck. Gold Hat is even now with Redhand; they are consulting as to his death, and the court will hang him within an hour."

"They would not let me cross the Plaza on such a mission."

"Ah, perhaps not, but Tonkaway Tom must be seen. I will seek him."

"You?" and Morris Mayne seemed to shrink from the girl, with a face blanched by fear.

Stella took from a drawer in her sewing-stand a revolver, which her hands clutched with firmness, and the next moment she stood at the door.

"I will seek him," cried Morris. "They shan't drag you into this deadly muddle."

"They will let me cross the Plaza; they will stop you," was the quick reply. "I am the person to seek Tonkaway Tom at this critical moment."

She opened the door and stepped out.

There was new beauty on the face of the Comet City waif. She smiled when she looked into Morris Mayne's eyes.

In another minute she was in the middle of the Square, and with steady tread was approaching Major Cypher's house.

"Hello thar, miss!" suddenly rung out a voice. "That's forbidden ground for the present."

Stella stopped and looked at the speaker. He was tall and tough looking like his companions, who, huddled together, seemed to have delegated him spokesman.

"You don't want to see the young Indian just now," continued the man. "We ar' waitin' on him, and when he comes out and appears for trial you may talk to him, but not before."

The girl seemed to regard the whole group for a second, at the end of which time she turned and moved on again.

"Stop her! She is in league with the red!" cried half a dozen voices.

Stella gave no heed to this.

All at once, out of the crowd leaped a man whose black beard, and panther-like eyes gave him a desperate appearance.

He bounded forward, calling on the girl in loud tones to halt, on peril of her life, and when she wheeled and faced him, he stopped like one shot.

Then it was that Donkey Dan saw something hanging along her dress, and when her hand came up he looked at a revolver whose bright barrel caught the golden glints of the unclouded sun.

"Curse her, let her go on!" he growled, and sullenly went back to his comrades.

He was received with silence and contempt, for all knew that the six-shooter had cowed the desperate wretch.

CHAPTER XI.

DEFIANCE.

STELLA entered the house, but heard nothing of the Indian boy who had crossed its threshold before her.

"He must be here," she murmured.

The following instant a door opened on her right, and the hunted Tonkaway stood before her with astonishment written on his face.

"Does Stella know what she risks in coming to me?" asked Tonkaway Tom.

"I know, but I could not keep back. You came back to the trap of death to find it set for you; you are in the snare now as surely as if it had caught you among the mountains. They will hang you with the accursed lasso of Redhand's Tribunal."

The eyes that shone in the red-skin's head seemed to twinkle.

"I am here because the trial brings me back."

"Yes, but you are one against fifty."

Tonkaway Tom touched Stella's hand with the tips of his fingers, and for a moment looked away.

"You do not know what happened in the mountains last night," he said. "If you were to search this house you would not find Roundabout Ruth."

"What, is she not here?"

"She went off last night, but not alone. They took her away because she winged Colonel Redhand."

"And hung her in the mountains?"

"They noosed her with one of the white lassoes and rode off and left her body dangling in the moonlight."

Stella uttered a cry of horror.

"Who did it?" she gasped.

"Three men of Comet City."

"The merciless wretches!"

"They gave her no time to pray, but threw the rope over a limb and drove her steed out from under it."

The girl was silent.

"You got the map you sent for?" she asked at last.

Tonkaway Tom's face underwent a sudden change.

"I sent for no map, Stella," he said.

The waif of Comet City fell back with pallid countenance.

"My God! then I was robbed of it."

"Who robbed you?"

But Stella seemed to have lost her tongue for she stood before the young Indian and looked into his face.

"Who came for the map?" continued the youth.

"It was Burro Bill. He brought a letter which he said was from you and I read it to be hoodwinked by the clever villain. Woe to him when we meet!"

But they were never to meet again, as we know.

"The map can be recovered," said Tonkaway Tom. "If he robbed you the act shall do him no good. So I have come back into a trap?"

"Yes; you have fallen into the hands of the mad mob of Comet City—the men who are under the thumb of Colonel Redhand."

"And you have come to ask me to run off?"

"For the present," cried Stella, clutching the Indian's wrist. "The trail will be broader by and by."

"It is plain enough now," was the reply. "Stella, Tonkaway Tom has come back to stay!"

The girl's countenance fell.

"Did you cut Roundabout Ruth down, or did you leave her to the vultures?" she asked.

"The beaks of the sky scavengers will not find her flesh. Roundabout Ruth, the huntress, is safe from the black wings."

These words seemed to give their speaker unbounded delight and bending over Stella's watchful face, he went on:

"The robbers can be robbed. The noose can be cheated of its prey."

"Did you cheat it?"

There was no answer and Stella turned toward the door which Tonkaway Tom was eying with the eagerness of a wolf.

The knock they had heard fell once more on the panel, and the Indian boy went forward.

"Don't! It may be the men of Comet City," cried the girl.

"We must meet some time. Why not now?" and Tom opened the door to stand face to face with a man who handed him a letter.

The Indian looked at it a moment and then said:

"I will come."

He turned to Stella as the door closed.

"A summons to Redhand," was all he said and she thought she detected a quiet smile at the corners of his mouth.

"But you will not go?"

"I have just sent word that I would come to him."

"Redhand and Gold Hat are desperate. The one is wounded and the other wants your blood just as badly."

"They will not get it."

Five minutes later the watching toughs of Comet City saw the door of Major Cypher's house open and Tonkaway Tom and Stella came out.

On the Plaza they parted, the Indian walking toward Redhand's cabin and Stella proceeding to her own, but with manifest reluctance.

"Here he comes," said Gold Hat who was Redhand's companion. "You must not show your teeth until the right moment."

"Never fear. I know when to show them."

The crowd on the Plaza followed the Indian ferret, but at a respectful distance, for they had their orders, and when they saw him lift the latch of Redhand's shanty and enter, they grinned to one another, for to them that shanty was a death-trap to the young Tonkaway.

Let us follow Tonkaway Tom.

Colonel Redhand, reclining on the couch at one side of the room, eyed his visitor like a hawk, but for a moment said nothing.

Gold Hat, outwardly not very fierce of aspect, met Tonkaway Tom with a smile and waited for Redhand to open the ball.

The two villains could hardly recover from the visit. It was evident that they had not expected the Indian to obey the summons, but he had come, walked into the very jaws of death, as it were.

"Well, I presume you got tired of running from pillar to post?" began Redhand, eying Tonkaway Tom who stood erect near the door but entirely at his ease. "You didn't find it congenial living in the mountains?"

"I came back because there was nothing for me where I was."

"I thought so. You will confess that you killed the Major and while you are at it, you will tell the whole story."

Could there have been anything more audacious than this?

"I have no confession to make," said Tonkaway Tom.

"That is as cool a sentence as I ever listened to. Come, Tom, you ought to know what is no longer a secret in Comet City. We are alone and what you tell here will not be used against you at the trial."

The eye of the young Indian fairly flashed.

Gold Hat moved nearer the door and dropped one of his hands to his belt.

"You won't tell, eh?" said Redhand. "Do you intend to keep back the secret until the white lasso is about your neck?"

"It may never get there."

"Hear him, Gold Hat. By Jove, I believe the red intends to defy the camp."

Gold Hat sprung up and the next moment he had thrown himself upon the Indian, bearing him back against the wall so suddenly that he could not resist.

Tonkaway Tom found himself pinned against the logs by the hands of the sport and the fingers seemed to meet in his throat.

"Don't carry it too far, Gold Hat," cried Redhand from his couch.

"I know how far to go, but if the young devil resists there will be a dead red-skin in this shanty."

All this had passed in a moment and Tom was practically helpless and in the clutches of the two bronzed conspirators.

"There are writing materials on the table and we know that Major Cypher gave you an education, though you are a full blood," continued Gold Hat. "All you have to do is to write out a brief confession and sign it. After that we will let you out to fight the Tribunal."

Out of the jaws of one lion to fight another!

The only reply Gold Hat received to his infamous proposition was a look of coolness and defiance from the youth.

"Won't you write out the confession?" said Redhand, rising in bed and giving Tom a sharp, merciless look.

"No."

The hands of Gold Hat seemed to sink deeper into the throat they encircled.

"Shall I?" he asked, looking over his shoulder at his companion.

"Give him another minute," was the answer. But an hour's time would have elicited the same reply from the Indian youth; it would have drawn the same look from his eyes.

All at once Gold Hat jerked Tonkaway Tom from the wall and dragged him to the table.

"Now," hoarsely cried the villain, "go to work!"

The Tonkaway looked up from the stool and quietly folded his arms.

"This is infamous," cried Redhand.

"It is simply an outrage."

"Turn him over to the lions outside!"

A roar of eagerness broke over Gold Hat's lips. Sinking his hands into the red boy's shoulders, he lifted him upon his feet and bore him toward the door which he opened with a kick.

Tonkaway Tom did not speak, but he looked very little like a lamb going to the slaughter in a spirit of meekness.

The handsome sport hurried him toward the middle of the Plaza and stopped in front of the watchful toughs congregated there.

"Here is your prisoner!" he cried. "Colonel Redhand commands that the trial proceed at once."

At the same time he pushed the boy toward the crowd, but the next second the hand of Tom had covered him and his voice rung out like a clarion:

"Men of Comet City, behold the killer of the Man of Mystery!"

CHAPTER XII. THE "CONFESSION."

A DEAD silence followed the accusation.

The crowd had fallen back, and its members were looking at the tableau before them.

"What war that?—did he say that Gold Hat killed the Major? The infernal rascal! That ought to settle his hash without further ceremony."

But Burke Sylvan had made no answer to the charge. He saw the red right hand of the young Tonkaway covering him like a pistol, and looking back toward Redhand's shanty, he got a glimpse of a devilish face at the window.

"That's a bold charge," said a voice at last, and those who looked saw the lips of Old Quartz trembling with the sentence.

"It's just bold enough to be a lie," roared a dozen voices in reply.

The best friend Tonkaway Tom had in the camp had spoken, and he saw the glowering looks he got for his interference.

"There's your victim," cried Gold Hat. "The colonel says convene court and try him."

"For what?"

"You know—for the murder of Major Cypher, the best friend you ever had."

Gold Hat turned his back to the young Indian and was walking off when Tom shouted:

"Bring me your paper. I will confess."

Gold Hat turned with a puzzled face.

"You don't mean that?" he said, half-doubtfully.

"I mean it by the soul of my dead mother."

Tonkaway Tom made a solemn gesture as he spoke, and Gold Hat looked at the crowd.

"One of you go to the colonel's shanty and carry the table and its contents hither."

A man sprang forward and the young Indian folded his arms and waited.

It took but little time to produce the table and writing materials, and it was placed in the very center of the Plaza, with the sun beating down upon it with all its furnace fervor.

The Indian boy was going to confess to the crime; he was about to sign his death-warrant, and not a word fell from the lips of the dark-faced spectators while they looked on.

"In Heaven's name, what is he about to do?" cried the fair girl who looked on from her window.

"He is going to confess."

"What! tell it all, and put his head in the white noose?"

"So it seems."

"But he defied them a while ago, and you heard him accuse Gold Hat of the murder."

"So he did, but he has asked for paper, and now you see him writing in the sun."

Stella went back to the scene before her and was silent.

Tonkaway Tom wrote slowly in presence of the assembled toughs of Comet City and when he reached the bottom of the sheet he signed his name and looked up.

Gold Hat stepped forward to take up the paper, but the scarlet hand of the Indian drew it out of his reach.

"It is to be read by Colonel Redhand," he said.

"But he can't come hither."

"He isn't shot in the legs."

The man listening and looking at the open door of the cabin a few yards away arose and came out.

"The boy is right. I am able to read his confession to the men of the camp," said Redhand, and the following moment his tall figure was seen advancing across the Square.

Tonkaway Tom was seen holding in his grip what he had written and his eyes were riveted upon Redhand as he came up.

"Let me have it," said the leader of the toughs as he put out his hand for the document and Tom placed it in his grasp.

The watchers with bated breath leaned toward this scene. They seemed to forget everything else in their eagerness to hear what the doomed Indian youth had transferred to paper.

Colonel Redhand took the paper and held it folded for a second while he stole a glance of victory at Gold Hat.

"Why doesn't Redhand read?" asked Tom.

Sure enough, why did he keep them all waiting?

Slowly the hand of the bronzed master of the camp opened the important paper.

He looked at the first line and then at the Indian boy.

Tom was watching like a hawk, but betrayed no emotion.

"This is a farce," suddenly roared Redhand.

"This is simply infamy piled on iniquity," and the next instant he was tearing up the paper and scattering it to pieces to the winds.

The breathless and startled men looked on amazed. They did not know what to make of the proceeding.

"The whole thing is a lie too black to be read to the pards of Comet City!" shouted Redhand white and red by turns. "It is the workings of a young murderer's brain and shall not save him."

"What was it? What did he write?" asked Gold Hat.

"The old accusation with more added," was the answer.

Gold Hat whirled upon the young Tonkaway and would have leaped upon him like a tiger if at that moment Tom had not executed a sudden bound.

In all the time they had had the boy in their power the two desperadoes had neglected to disarm him. He fell back long enough to whip out the knife he carried beneath his half frock and then went at Gold Hat with the agility of a panther.

The whole crowd swayed forward.

"Reserve him for the white noose!" shouted Redhand, above the wild tumult of the moment.

A dozen hands flew out to clutch Tonkaway Tom, and Gold Hat, fortunately for himself, grasping the swiftly-descending knife, held the boy with a grip of steel, and when the mob landed on the scene there was nothing for it to do.

Tonkaway Tom was manacled with a lasso and thrown into the hands of men who knew what was expected of them.

The boy's spring had failed and when he locked up and saw at a cabin window just across the Plaza a face which was white and full of pity, he seemed to regret the whole mad play.

Gold Hat and Redhand walked back to the latter's shanty.

"What was his confession?" asked the handsome sport.

"It was that he had traced out the motive and the man—that he knew who killed the major, and that the weapon of death was where he could lay his hand on it at any time."

The men looked at one other with half-troubled faces.

"Are you sure you destroyed the paper?"

"The pieces were trampled under foot by the crowd."

"There must be no playing now; the young red must feel the hand of vengeance."

"He shall."

"He has three friends in camp."

"Three?"

"Yes, the girl, her lover and Old Quartz."

"You are right, but what are three against fifty?"

"Not much, that's a fact. But what coolness! I never saw his like."

"He learned a good deal of it from Cypher."

"But the proof of the killing? Did he lie there?"

There was no reply for a little while and the two conspirators sat silent in the shanty.

"Why didn't Roundabout Ruth come out and show her sympathy?" suddenly questioned Redhand.

"That mystifies me. She may not be there."

"Go and see. Stay! You are not afraid to meet her?"

"No."

Gold Hat crossed the Plaza and entered Major Cypher's house. He made his way to the parlor without meeting any one, and then searched the whole house.

"We are too late; the bird has gone back to the bush," he smiled, coming back to Redhand.

"What, gone?"

"The house is empty."

"When did she go away?"

"That is a puzzle."

A cloud suddenly darkened the master sport's face.

"That is the only human being I fear," he said, lowering his voice. "The boy is harmless, but still alive. He will never quit the hands of the court, for the grip it has on him is the grip of death. Last night I fell into a doze and there came to me a hand which seemed to form at the edge of a cloud, and while I thought I could escape from it it lowered and suddenly fastened on my throat like the beak of an eagle. I sprang up and when I came to my senses was crouched in one corner of the shanty, fighting off the ghostly apparition."

"It was the fever at work," smiled Gold Hat. "You must have wrestled with it a long time last night."

"But it was so real. It seemed that I could not fly from that hand and I was all in a sweat when it vanished."

Gold Hat went to the window and looked out. "Here comes the girl again," he said.

"Stella?"

"Yes. She is heading this way and—"

"Shut her out!" cried Redhand. "Tell her that I will not listen to her. She comes to plead for the life of Tonkaway Tom."

"No she doesn't. She has stopped and is picking up the pieces of the young red's confession."

A groan and an oath fell from Redhand's lips.

"Go out and stop her! No, let her go on—she can't find enough to make it interesting. The red is doomed and I will carry my secret to the grave."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SHOT IN THE NIGHT.

STELLA had better luck than the master sport of Comet City anticipated; she found nearly every bit of paper and carrying them back to her house, drew a chair up to the table and began to put them together.

It was a task that gave her a good deal of trouble, but she kept at it until she rose from her work with a flushed face, but with triumph in her eyes.

She had succeeded at last; the words traced by Tonkaway Tom on the paper which Redhand refused to read aloud to the assembled toughs of the camp were before her and they were of startling import.

Stella had taken up several hours in her task and was proud of her achievement.

She was about to pick up the bits of paper when a heavy step was heard and turning round she saw that Old Quartz had come in.

The waif of Comet City knew that he was Tom's friend; she was aware that on several occasions he had spoken out for the boy and that not a drop of coward blood ran through the old man's veins.

Old Quartz glanced from the astonished Stella to the table and advancing bent over the pieced confession for a moment.

"Did you find all the pieces? I saw you hunting for them," said he.

"I found all but one or two small ones, but they are not needed."

"May I read what the youngster wrote?"

"Read it."

The face of Old Quartz bent lower, and Stella saw him reading the red ferret's writing.

"Heavens!" he suddenly cried. "It's a stunner, eh, girl?"

"It is no wonder that Redhand refused to read it to the camp."

"I should say not, the rascal."

Stella drew nearer and looked into the old man's face.

"He is surely in the trap now," she said. "He is in the very shadow of death, and they will not let him get out."

"Fact, girl."

"That paper contains the truth."

"I don't doubt it, and that's why it wasn't read."

Old Quartz fell back and folded his arms, looking at Stella with a half-comical leer in his eyes.

"It's one ag'in' fifty, you might say," he went

on. "You and I and Morris are all the friends Tom has in Comet City. The woman who might have taken his part because she hates Redhand and Gold Hat, has gone away. We must fight it out ourselves."

There was no reply.

"What are you going to do with that?" and Old Quartz pointed at the confession on the table.

"I shall keep it as a weapon. I shall retain it for use against the conspirators."

The girl's eyes flashed.

"You will have them all against you."

"Perhaps."

"Colonel Redhand will see that the coils tighten round Tonkaway Tom, and that his friends are rendered powerless to help him."

"But the other crime? Will that remain undiscovered?"

The old man went to the window as if a sound outside had startled him.

"What is it?" asked Stella.

"It was nothing," and he came back, and with his bronzed hand touched the girl's arm. "There is to be war here," he went on. "This woman who has gone off will come back. She shot Redhand after calling him her once husband. I knew the fellow had a record as dark as a thunder-cloud, but I did not know that he had been that creature's husband. Yes, she will come back."

Stella was watching the old miner with great interest.

"Captain Quartz, did you ever see Roundabout Ruth before she came here?"

"Truth to tell, I did," was the answer. "I don't think she recognized me, but I saw her more than a year ago when I wasn't living in this camp. She was then on a child-hunt, she had lost a daughter, had it stolen from her, so she said, and we saw a good deal of her then. But I never suspected that she had been Redhand's wife."

Stella did not speak.

"They will try the Indian boy before night."

"By the Tribunal?" she asked.

"By the Tribunal."

"That means death."

"Of course."

"Captain Quartz, Tonkaway Tom has not finished his trail; he has yet to bring to light—to prove who killed Major Cypher, his friend. The boy must live to do this."

The old man looked troubled.

"Let the Tribunal have its way and he will not live."

"That is true. You say Roundabout Ruth will return? When she comes there will be a reckoning for some people."

"For one man, at least."

Half an hour later the girl was alone, and Old Quartz was watching a group of men who occupied seats on the porch of the Double Dirks.

"As full a nest of vultures as I ever saw," he commented under his breath. "They are hatching up some plan to get rid of the boy in their hands; they are putting their heads together for the grand triumph of rascality. But I don't think they'll win."

If he had been asked at that moment why he didn't think Redhand and his men would triumph over the young Indian, Old Quartz could not have given any good reason, but he felt it—that was all.

Meantime, in the house to which he had been taken after the scene on the Plaza, Tonkaway Tom stood and watched the sunlight as it lay on the Square.

He had seen one thing which sent a glow to his face; he had watched Stella as she picked up the pieces of paper thrown down by Redhand, and a smile crossed his countenance when the girl bore off the bits in triumph.

"She will put them together," said the Indian. "She will read what I wrote in the sun and her wonder will increase. But she must not get into trouble on my account. Stella must not pass into the shadow of the dark hands of Comet City. I will stand between her and that."

He seemed to forget his own dark fortunes, for all at once he sprung to the door, but found that it was locked, and that he was really the locked-in captive of the two sports.

Tonkaway Tom watched the afternoon fade, and the long shadows of evening lengthen on the Plaza. Overhead soared a dozen dark specks which the boy regarded from the narrow window of his prison; he leaned on the rough sill and watched the movements of the great birds of the sky.

He seemed a statue there in the semi-gloom of the shanty, and his eyes would now and then light up with a gleam which would fade for another, softer and full of thought.

He saw the night come on. He saw the lights glitter in the Golden Gem, and watched the frequenters of the den pass in to their nightly amusement.

Perhaps he wondered why he had not been taken out for trial. Why had not the masters of the camp dragged him before the court and finished the game so far as he was concerned?

The mystery deepened with the night.

All at once, the boy who had not left the window saw a figure on the Plaza.

It paused for a little while in the middle of the Square, and then came on again.

There was something fascinating in that slyly creeping form, to the boy, in the shadow of dearth. Tonkaway Tom leaned forward until his face almost touched the glass, and watched it as he had never watched a human figure before.

It came on until it stood within twenty feet of the shanty door.

"Gods!" cried the red youth. "It is Stella!"

It was Stella, but not in her usual garb. The girl had discarded her garments for others, which were not likely to betray her, and the wide-brimmed hat which she had pulled over her eyes rendered her for all the world like some young miner just in from the mines.

But the keen eyes of Tonkaway Tom had discovered the deception: he had ferreted out the girl who was the best friend he had on earth, but the thought that she was running into danger for him sent his blood cold through his body.

Stella crept closer, and closer to the shanty, keeping in the shadows, and when she rose from the ground, almost at the door, Tom's lips were at the dingy pane.

He wanted to warn her off—to tell her that it was death to try to rescue him, for he believed that that was her mission.

"Go back!" Tom sent beyond the shanty in a keen whisper. "For heaven's sake don't come nearer, but let me fight it out with them alone."

Stella stopped and looked toward the window. She had heard him.

"Go back!" repeated Tom.

"Not until I have told you something," she exclaimed. "I must tell you."

She was at the window, with her face so close that the young captive could see that her eyes fairly flashed.

"She has come back. She is at my house!" cried the girl.

"Roundabout Ruth?"

"Yes, yes. She is under my roof, and says that they shall not condemn you by the Tribunal."

The Indian smiled.

"She is too late for that, Stella; I am condemned already."

"But—"

"Don't move that! I see you. Stand whar you ar' or I'll send a bullet through your head!"

The interruption caused the girl to wheel and face the man advancing toward the cabin.

"Dodge him in the dark!" cried the boy.

Stella sprung away, and there was a flash, and then a loud report.

"The girl is dead!" gasped Tonkaway Tom.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DEATH COURT.

THE revolver shot and the fall of the girl caused Tonkaway Tom to recoil from the window with a startling cry.

He was sure that Stella had been killed by the guard who had left his post long enough to take a drink at the Double Dirks, and, on returning, had caught the waif of Comet City at the shanty.

He wanted to get out, forgetting that he would have been but one against the whole lot, but the locked door prevented.

He saw the guard run to where he had dropped the girl, but all at once, to Tom's delight, Stella sprung up and dashed away.

She vanished while he looked, and then he went back into the deeper shadows of the shanty and waited for the next move.

Trial would come now.

But an hour passed and he could see the open door of the Golden Gem, and beyond it the usual number of gamblers. The shot did not seem to disturb them, though they must have heard it, for it had rung through the entire camp.

Tonkaway Tom paced the narrow floor of his prison, waiting for news from Stella.

"So Roundabout Ruth is back, is she?" he suddenly asked himself, and thoughts of their last meeting in the mountain, when he cut her down from the tree to which the three villains had bound her for the vultures. "She told me at parting that she would come back, that the

band of vengeance should fall upon the heads of her enemies, and that Redhand should give up his secret before he died."

Tonkaway Tom waited a long time for news.

Stella was not dead, but had returned perhaps to her home where she might be nursing a dangerous wound.

Suddenly the boy's ears were saluted by the sound of voices and the chain outside the door rattled.

The portal opened and he looked into the faces of three men. He knew them all.

"Come!" said one, and the Indian ferret stepped forward and felt a hand at his wrist.

They took him across the Plaza and into the Golden Gem.

The time had come.

Tonkaway Tom saw that preparations had been made for his trial. Benches had been arranged for it, and the man who stood at the counter, touching it with his broad back, was Redhand, with his arm in a sling.

The lamps arranged along the walls shone on the scene and enabled the red youth to see that nearly all of Comet City's population had assembled.

He was led down the aisle, between a double row of benches, and stood where every eye could fall upon him.

There was a fearlessness in Tonkaway Tom's eye that would have gained him sympathy in any other crowd.

He knew he had no friends there for Old Quartz was conspicuous by his absence, and Morris Mayne might have been watching over Stella, the waif.

Gold Hat stood near Redhand, waiting for that worthy to open the case, and every one looked at the master sport of Comet, wondering what his first words would be.

The Indian boy folded his arms and surveyed the scene as anxious to have it all over as those who thirsted for his young blood.

"I declare the Tribunal of Comet City open for business!" suddenly rung out the voice of Colonel Redhand, and his fist came down upon the counter shaking the glass which he had just drained.

A dead silence followed the proclamation.

Then, with a half smile on his face, the desperado turned upon the prisoner.

"Tonkaway Tom, you stand accused of the murder of Major Cypher. Guilty or not guilty?"

The Indian seemed to start forward at this, and his hand shut madly.

"Not guilty!"

The first murmur of the court ran around those who looked on.

Colonel Redhand glanced toward Gold Hat and then with a wave of his hand said:

"Gold Hat will be sworn."

In an instant the eyes of the young Indian were riveted upon the handsome sport.

Gold Hat stepped to the front and held up his dainty hand which was gloved.

A form of oath was administered and the witness was asked to tell what he knew.

In a firm but eager voice, the man proceeded and told of his visit to Major Cypher the night of the murder and said that when taking his leave he saw the face of Tonkaway Tom at the head of the stair.

He said, too, that on going back to the house afterward he discovered a light in the room where he had left the Man of Mystery and that a door opening suddenly, the light went out and he saw a figure come out of the house and spring away.

The whole crowd listened breathlessly, and when the witness finished and had gone back to his place alongside the counter, the eye of the red youth followed him. For an instant their gaze met, but though something seemed about to issue from Tonkaway Tom's lips, he did not speak.

Witness after witness was called, but they knew but little. The old circumstance of the boy having the dead man's will in his possession the morning after the murder was brought forward when all at once Tonkaway Tom, leaning toward the two sports, cried out:

"What has become of the will of the major? Into whose hands has it fallen, and where is it now?"

"The prisoner's time has not come," said Redhand, shooting Tom a malicious look. "He will have his inning when the prosecution is through."

The jury was the whole crowd, and the boy, looking over it, knew that it was against him.

"It is your time now," said Redhand at last, looking at Tonkaway Tom. "Let your story be brief, for we don't want to waste any time on this matter."

No time with a matter which was one of life and death!

The prisoner did not move. His eye sought out the last witness, a man who had sworn that on one occasion he saw Tom point his finger at Major Cypher, and say that he would unmask him one of these days.

"Come forward," and the finger of the Indian boy covered the last witness.

The man looked at Redhand for instructions.

"Obey the prisoner," said the master sport.

As the tall desperado stepped forward the eyes of Tom seemed to look him through.

"You are about the only witness who has not lied," said the young Tonkaway. "You have told the truth. I did threaten Major Cypher that time, but it was only half in earnest. He knew that I had fathomed his secret, that I knew something about his past life, and that was the first and only time I ever told him as much. I loved the man who took me when I was dying and brought me back to life, and yet I am accused of killing him. Do you think I would place around his neck the white lasso and then give the alarm? Does that man yonder believe that this hand turned on the man who befriended it, and sent his soul to the Great Spirit?" and the hand of the speaker suddenly covered Redhand.

A sneer, which the master sport of Comet City sent round the room, was Tom's reward.

"He knows better. Colonel Redhand, standing against you counter, holds in his bosom more than one secret. He knows that the man who killed Major Cypher came up through the floor that night, that he did not enter the room from without, but that, serpent-like, he crawled up from the ground, and with the white lasso did the deed. He knows that the compact had been made weeks before, that the murderer was to come from the south, that after a few meetings in the room of the nooses, the cord was to fall over the major's head. All this is known by the man at the counter."

"But that is not proof," roared Redhand. "If the prisoner is talking for time—if he thinks he can talk the court out of patience, and thus blunt the sword of justice—"

"Hear me through. It is my hour," broke in the voice of the doomed boy.

"You shall hear him through. This court, packed though it has been, shall hear the prisoner, to the end of his story!"

These words came from near the open door. All looked in that direction.

"Great God! the dead alive!" cried a giant in bronze who fell back the moment he caught sight of the person who had spoken.

"The woman we left to the vultures, as sure as fate!" said another.

The third man who stood near did not speak at all, but his face was white and his eyes seemed to start from his head.

Roundabout Ruth stood in the open door.

She had come in like an apparition and was showing her splendid figure in the glowing light of the lamps, and for the moment Tonkaway Tom was forgotten and every eye was fixed on the huntress.

She took another step toward the middle of the room.

"Go on!" she said to Tom.

The Indian boy took her at her word and resumed.

But he had not uttered half a dozen sentences when Redhand once more striking the counter with his fist, shouted:

"Woman or no woman, this farce must end! The court will take the case and bring in a verdict. All those in favor of death will hold up their hands."

That instant Roundabout Ruth backed outward and threw into view a brace of revolvers.

"The man who votes for death drops in his track!" she cried.

Not a hand went up.

Colonel Redhand, almost frothing at the mouth, looked at Gold Hat.

The handsome sport had fallen back several steps and was eying Roundabout Ruth like a jungle tiger.

CHAPTER XV.

A BREATHING SPELL.

It would seem that despite the menace of Roundabout Ruth's revolver the toils had closed around Tonkaway Tom too tightly to be broken.

The cool-headed woman was no match for the fifty desperate men by whom she was confronted and the master sport and his pards had it pretty much their own way.

Redhand glared at the woman who had winged him a few days before and her presence seemed to send pangs of keen torture through his wounded shoulder.

She never quailed while she stood facing the surprised crowd with the two six-shooters in her hands and fire in the eyes that backed them up.

It was a moment big with the fate of lives, and the dark court of Comet City had never witnessed such a scene.

"Do you want the young assassin?" asked Redhand, finding his tongue at last and breaking the silence.

"I want him to tell his story and then the Tribunal shall pass sentence."

"But he is condemned already. The evidence against him is plain enough for us and we are ready for the vote."

"There's no doubt of that. But let him be heard."

Colonel Redhand waved his hand toward the silent and watchful Tom.

"Go on," he said.

Instead of answering him, the Indian boy stepped toward the outstretched revolvers of Roundabout Ruth and looked over them into the woman's face.

"Why tell the truth to this infamous court?" he said.

"Why tell what I know and whither my trail has led me since the murder? Am I not condemned in spite of anything I might say? Behold the slayer of Major Cypher!"

He had turned and covered Gold Hat with his hand.

The tall sport laughed.

"The same old charge," he said. "I have heard it before now and from the same tongue. 'Behold the slayer.' Is that all you can say?"

Tonkaway Tom thrust one hand into the breast of his half-coat and drew forth something that glittered like a snake-skin in the lamplight.

He held it up in full view of all.

It was a noose, and so white that it looked as if it had been made of silver threads.

"Behold the white lasso," he went on. "This is the sign of the Lasso League. This is the death weapon of the stranglers of the Southwest—the sworn league of the border. The hands that made this lasso rot underground and among the bones of people of my own race. Red Buffalo was the maker of the white lassoes, which no one else could make. One day there came to the red village a man who engaged Red Buffalo to make many white lassoes. He made them, and the white man went off. By and by a man wounded to death was found in the desert, and he told how the white lassoes had been used. They killed men in many places, and the swooping vultures found their necks encircled by the nooses made by Red Buffalo. There was a Lasso League, and it carried on its work till its arms seemed to grow weary. That was years ago, and the League worked until it seemed to have killed enough."

Tonkaway Tom paused and looked round upon his auditors. Every man was listening, hanging breathless, as it were, upon his words.

"But the Lasso League was not broken up. It only slumbered," he went on. "There came a time when Major Cypher entered Comet City and built his house here. Tonkaway Tom came with him, and he knew that the White Lasso was still in existence. It had marked Major Cypher for a victim, and when the proper time came—when he had been doomed—he was encircled with the silver cord and left dead in his room. Tonkaway Tom swore over the dead body of his friend that he would find the trail and run it down. He has kept his word. He holds in his hand one of the lassoes made by old Red Buffalo of the Tonkaways. Where did he find it?"

There was no answer.

"Let the white men who hang upon my words go down under the house of the major; let them open a certain door and touch a button in the wall. They will enter a dark chamber which will lead them on and on beneath the ground until they emerge on the mountain. They will find in one corner of the dark chamber a box which contains more than one white lasso. They will see that they are alike, and that the same hand made them long ago. The man who came to Old Buffalo, and had the lassoes made had a strange mark on his bosom. It was a mark made, perhaps, when he was young, for it shows crossed hands, one smaller than the other, as though it was a woman's. Tonkaway Tom remembers seeing the mark one day when he found the white man along the river that flowed through the land of the Tonkaways. Do the pards of Comet City ask who wears the crossed hands?"

Silence met the last words of the young Indian,

and he looked toward Gold Hat with a smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Let Gold Hat open his bosom that the pards may see it," he went on.

Burke Sylvan saw that every eye was riveted upon him.

"Must we listen to the poorly spun balderdash of this young fly in the web of guilt?" he grated? "Are we going to pay the least attention to the tale we have heard? As for myself, I care not, he can spin any lie he pleases. I want nothing but justice. Let him be convicted or acquitted, and now."

"That is right. We shall vote. Men of Comet City, let nothing keep down your hands. Ye who believe Tonkaway Tom guilty of the killing of Major Cypher hold up your hands."

It was the same order which Roundabout Ruth had interrupted.

The woman's revolvers had dropped to her sides, but she was gripping them with the same determination.

"Hands up!" roared Redhand.

A dozen rose above their owners' heads.

The two sports were seen to grow white.

"All of you for acquittal, hands up!" commanded the master sport.

Thirty hands moved toward the ceiling.

"Come," said Redhand, turning to Gold Hat. "We shall leave this accursed place."

The two sports moved toward the door, and no one molested them.

There had been no great revulsion of feeling in Tonkaway Tom's behalf. The majority of hands for acquittal meant something else than that.

"We don't mean to let 'im off," was said behind the two pards before they were half-way across the Plaza.

"You don't eh? Then, why in the name of Satan did you vote that way?"

"The menace of that woman's revolvers," was the answer. "There was shoot in her eye, and we concluded to vote for acquittal, and give us another chance."

"But, the boy is free."

The man fell back, and looking that moment toward the open door of the Golden Gem, saw Tonkaway Tom come out, followed by a crowd of sullen, silent toughs.

"Look at 'em," the man went on. "Does that look like they intend to let 'im get away?"

It did not look like it, and Redhand threw a glance into the face of his companion.

"The boys understand it better than we do," he said. "The boy is still in the net."

"I don't know about that," was the reply. "He will now get out of camp with that infernal woman to cover his retreat."

Tonkaway Tom was walking close to Roundabout Ruth, and was looking up into her white and tensely-drawn face.

"Why didn't you finish her when you were at it?" Gold Hat went on. "With her for his ally, that boy may defy the whole camp."

There was no answer, but the lips of Redhand were welded and his eyes spoke the feelings of his heart.

"Go back and let the future take care of itself," he said to the tough, who had followed from the saloon and was waiting for orders.

"Don't you intend to fight?"

"You heard me. Summon the members to the hall to-night—right away. All will be settled there."

The man turned and went back.

"In the veins of that Indian is the blood of a man I used to know," he went on to Gold Hat. "You remember him?"

"The chief, Eagle Claw? I should say I ought to recollect him, if that is the man you mean."

"He has the eyes of Eagle Claw, and the same voice when he is cool. We must spin an entirely new web to-night."

The crowd which had followed Tonkaway Tom and Roundabout Ruth from the scene of the trial, fell back at sight of the man who had conferred with Redhand, and the two friends were left alone.

"You know as well as I do that this is not for long," said the woman. "You are not free, though they have declared you so. It means only another grip."

"Another web by the laced spiders of the hills?" laughed the Indian boy, his face suddenly becoming the seat of a deep coolness. "I am ready. They will plan anew, but they shall feel now the avenging hand of the sworn Nemesis of that dark murder in the nabob's house."

"What will you do?"

The hand of Tonkaway Tom wandered to where Roundabout Ruth's rested at her side, and touched the tapering fingers.

Tonkaway Tom, the Red Shadower.

"Wait and see," he said. "There is one secret I did not give you the night we stood in the Chamber of the Nooses."

"I thought you were holding something back. After that, what?"

"It may be for you to say."

They walked to Old Quartz's shanty, and the boy opened the door for Roundabout Ruth.

"What, did they acquit you?" cried the old miner, springing up from a stool. "I hadn't the heart to go down there, and here I've been waitin' for news with fear at my heart all the time. You are free, Tom?"

"Free till the next blow falls," said the Indian youth.

CHAPTER XVI.

"SOLIQUE."

THE underground chamber was brilliant with lights and here and there stood men whose faces told that they were there on a desperate mission.

At one end of the place stood the two sports, their tall figures showing off in the light and their visages indicative of something determined.

Redhand looked at his friends a moment and then stepped out from the wall.

"Brethren of the White Lasso, we have met to brush from our path the obstacles that lie in it. There is to be no more trials for I dissolve the Tribunal and from this hour it has no existence. We have a duty to perform and the snakes that hiss against us within the limits of this camp are to be crushed before they can sting."

All knew what these words meant.

Colonel Redhand stooped and opened a box which had been dragged from one corner of the chamber. Taking from it a white noose, he held it up in the sight of all and did not speak again for some seconds.

"You heard the story told by the young captive of the Tribunal," he continued. "You heard how a white man came to the country of the Tonkaways and hired Red Buffalo to make him so many. This is one of them."

He swung the lasso round and round in the light.

Its hairs—it was made from the tails and manes of white horses—glistened like silver threads and the sports looked at it flying about in the dark hand of Redhand and some may have wondered how many people it had choked in its time.

"The boy in red is nominally free. He stands acquitted for the time, but he must not get to boast of his freedom."

Looks of approval met these words and the men about the walls of the chamber responded with one brief sentence.

"The boy shall die!"

"Look! I throw the lasso into the air," said Redhand. "It will fall upon a certain hand. Hands up!"

In an instant the toughs of Comet City stepped into the middle of the chamber and formed a ring.

Every hand went up and the next moment the silver lasso took a leap into the air.

It seemed to circle there like a bird and then, coming down, fell over one of the hands and the man who had caught it looked at the thrower.

"The prize is yours, Solique," said Redhand. "I could not have thrown the lasso to a better man."

The catcher of the noose took it from his arm and held it high above his head.

"I will tighten it," he cried. "The lasso shall tighten about the red neck of the Tonkaway. I have tightened lassoes before now, ha, ha."

"We believe you, Solique. The duty lies before you. Make no mistake."

The man thrust the noose underneath his coat and left the chamber.

Those who watched him disappear breathed free once more. They had not caught the lasso; fate had directed it to Solique's hand and he had in this manner been chosen executioner of Tonkaway Tom the Indian ferret.

Let us follow the man thus chosen.

Everybody in Comet City and for miles around knew Solique because he was said to have Spanish blood in his veins.

He was by no means a giant in stature, but on the contrary was short and wiry. Fire snapped in his little eyes which were deeply set and he had the soft hands of a belle. But there was a panther in Solique's nature; he had been merciless on more than one occasion and Redhand felt that after all this one man was surer than the dread Tribunal which he had dissolved with a word.

Solique went up and slunk to his own shanty.

This place was near the edge of the camp and stood somewhat apart from its neighbors.

He said nothing, for at all times Solique was as sullen as a wolf and stuck his enemies without warning.

Midnight came and the wiry figure of the man with the silver noose in his possession crept along the huts of Comet City and halted at one where he listened.

Did he know what was inside at the time?

He crouched at the door for a long time and then sent a hand toward the latch.

The midnight hour had come and with the exception of the voices of the faro players at the Golden Gem, Comet City was quiet.

Solique entered the shanty and shut the door behind him.

Standing in the dark, he seemed to be counting the seconds as they passed over his head, but he was listening more than looking.

With one hand half buried in his bosom and clutching the silver noose the drawer of the ghastly prize moved one foot forward.

He seemed to know where a couch leaned against the wall.

All at once the little figure of Solique fell forward and dropped upon the couch.

It was like the landing of a panther upon a doe.

There was a short sharp cry, but it was one of disappointment. Solique had found nothing under him.

For a second the chosen agent of the Silver Noose lay on the couch and panted out his rage. He had expected to find some one on that very bed but he found no one.

Solique arose at last and drew near the one window of the shanty.

"He came here; I saw him," he said under his breath. "The young red-skin came to Old Quartz's shanty and Old Quartz went off toward the mountains; but he is not here now."

It was five minutes before Solique was calm enough to quit the scene of his failure. He put back the lasso which he had half drawn in the dark and went to the door.

Out he went with no blood on his hands this time.

What had become of the boy?

Solique seemed to study a little in the gloom.

"He did not go off. I heard him tell Roundabout Ruth that he was here to fight it out and Tonkaway Tom is a person of his word. He is still in camp."

Twenty minutes later a shadow entered the house of the nabob. It was the tiger-like Solique.

Would he find his prey there?

He made no noise, as if his feet were gifted with the art of profound silence, and went from room to room.

When he stopped he fell back from a figure lying on a couch in the very room where Major Cypher had terminated his strange life.

There were shadows on the room, but not enough to defeat the wily Solique's designs.

He approached the couch, made out the outlines of the person resting thereon and then crouched as he had in Old Quartz's cabin.

All at once his little body went through the air and landed upon the couch.

It went down with his weight and the next moment he was lying on the floor dazed by one of the most singular events in his dark career.

There were hands at his throat and they seemed to be on fire.

Solique was pressed to the floor and rendered unable to use the silver lasso.

The glimpse he got of the face above him made him hold his breath. It was human, yet looked so fierce and tiger-like that he could not believe that it was the face of a creature of flesh and blood.

Solique twisted his lithe little body in attempts to get out from under his antagonist but his exertions seemed vain.

At last the hands appeared to have burned their way into his throat; he seemed to feel the fire deep in his flesh and with a wild yell which torture wrenched from him he fell over and quivered.

During this mad battle for the mastery not a word had been uttered by the combatants.

Solique lay on the floor with the silver lasso falling from his bosom and there was no spectator of this startling tableau.

The night wore on and the house of the crime stood dark and dread in the center of the camp.

All at once a tiny flame shot upward, then another and another, and the gamblers of the Golden Gem ran out, and discovered that fire was licking up the scene of the mystery.

Comet City, roused by the cry it had never heard within its limits until then, rushed to the

spot and saw the house in the grip of the fire demon.

"Go in and see who is in the Room of Mystery," cried Redhand, turning to the gaping crowd.

Half a dozen men sprung forward and dashed in the door.

Their vanishment did not last long and a wild shout went up when they were seen again dragging something human like at their heels.

Both Redhand and Gold Hat sprung to where the men dropped their burden and bent over it.

"Great heavens, Solique!"

Yes, the object they had dragged from the burning house was the executioner of the Silver Lassoes.

And about the red throat of the dead man was the fatal noose he had caught in mid-air in the Chamber of the Nooses!

Gold Hat looked into the face of his pard and turned on his heel, leaving the flames to destroy the house of the nabob.

"He failed," said a voice at his heels before he had gone far.

"I should say he did," was the answer. "After that where is the man who will try to strangle thy protegee of the dead nabob?"

Redhand did not speak for a moment.

He looked over his shoulder at the house, but all of a sudden drew back and touched Gold Hat's arm.

"Look down the street to the first cross path," he whispered. "You can see him standing in the light."

"I see him. It is the Indian boy—the young oath-bound ferret of this accursed camp!"

Colonel Redhand said nothing more, though in another moment the figure of Tonkaway Tom had disappeared.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MUTINY.

THE morning after the fire all that remained of Major Cypher's house was a heap of blackened ruins.

The toughs of Comet City looked at it and wondered who had been the incendiary.

The two sports gazed upon the scene from the windows of Redhand's shanty and inwardly cursed the young Indian—the Jonah, as they now called him, of the camp.

"Something must be done and that quickly; the last play must be made. The men are on the point of mutiny; they are cursing our failure to beat the boy and his friend, Roundabout Ruth."

The speaker was Gold Hat and his voice betrayed his anxiety and impatience.

Colonel Redhand did not answer for a moment.

"Where is the woman?" he asked at last.

"I haven't seen her since she walked out of the Golden Gem with the boy."

Redhand went to one corner of the cabin and took down from a shelf something that looked like the white noose which had cost Solique his life.

"We win or lose by this," he said coming back to his companion.

"I'm afraid we'll lose."

"What, do you fear we won't succeed just because Solique didn't?" he laughed. "Why, we still have the camp with us, but if we hesitate we may find some dissension in the ranks."

"It is wide spread now. They looked upon Solique's death as the result of our attempt to run everything."

"Well, wasn't it that, Gold Hat?"

The handsome sport smiled.

"The girl is coming toward the shanty," he said at this moment and Redhand craned his neck nearer the pane and fastened his eyes upon Stella who was advancing toward the shanty.

He watched the beautiful girl a moment and then fell back. Gold Hat happening to look down at his hands saw that they were clinched.

Stella came on, but stopped when near the cabin and looked at the face at the window.

"I am nothing to her," said Redhand through his teeth. "She may have put together the bits of paper I left on the Plaza. If so, she may think she is at the threshold of a secret. I won't see her."

At this moment Stella came on again and her hand knocked at the door.

Gold Hat looked at the master sport of the camp and seemed to await for instructions.

Redhand said sullenly:

"Let her in."

This Gold Hat speedily did and the waif of Comet City stood before the two pards.

Her face was white and her eyes glowed with a strange eagerness.

Redhand looked at the girl, but said nothing.

"I am here for the truth," said Stella. "Don't you think the time has come for it?"

and

She gazed straight into Redhand's eyes while she spoke.

"For the truth?" echoed the master sport. "I don't know why you should come to me."

Stella's hand disappeared in her bosom and drew out a papper which showed signs of having been pieced.

"You gave me a good deal of trouble," she went on, smiling. "I worked a long time on this but succeeded at last. This is what Tonkaway Tom wrote in the sun. He hints at a secret which you must possess—a secret connected with my identity."

There was no answer.

"Will you divulge it?" asked Stella. "Will you tell me that which I have longed to know? for I have been a nameless waif long enough and would know the truth no matter what it is."

"Go and draw it from the young Indian," said Redhand. "Get him to tell you what he knows."

"But he does not know. You see he merely hints at the secret which he says is in your keeping. I have come to you."

The dark hand of the master sport pointed to the door.

"I divulge nothing," said he. "I will keep what I have for I am not yet under the noose."

Stella fell back with a sigh. She reached the door and turning looked into the stern face that met hers.

"You will not?" she said.

"I will not."

The door opened and shut and Redhand wheeled upon his companion.

"It didn't take long to get rid of her," he smiled. "I will keep my secret; they shan't tear it from me. There will be hot work now."

The sun soared higher and higher. Its rays beat down upon the Plaza, and the shadows of the cabins shortened on the ground.

And yet neither Roundabout Ruth nor Tonkaway Tom had shown themselves, and those who looked for them knew not where they were.

All at once the familiar figure of Old Quartz was seen standing in front of his shanty, with a peculiar look in his deep-set eyes. All Comet City knew that he was the red boy's friend.

The old man advanced to the middle of the Plaza and was seen to plant himself firmly there as he turned his face toward that part of the camp where Redhand's shanty stood.

Those who watched him wondered what was about to happen, for the old miner's looks told that something was on the tapis—something startling and new.

"In God's name, what is the old rat up to?" asked Redhand, who was a witness of these proceedings from his own hut. "The old man never showed that much spirit before, and—"

"There he goes!" broke in Gold Hat, who was holding open the door to catch the words that seemed about to fall from Quartz's lips. "It is a proclamation."

The next moment the hand of the old miner rose above his head and he cried:

"Attention, men of Comet City! It has been decided that the reign of Colonel Redhand has lasted long enough and that he is from this moment a private citizen of Comet City entitled to no more rights than the commonest."

An imprecation fell from Redhand's tongue as he sprung to the door and the next moment stood in the sunlight with a revolver in his hand.

"What is that?" he exclaimed, advancing toward the old man on the Plaza. "Who dares make such a law here? Where is the person who sent you forth to promulgate such an insulting thing?"

Old Quartz turned slowly upon the man and looked him squarely in the eye.

"The League of the Silver Lasso is doomed," was the reply. "The day of its work is over and there dawns for Comet City a brighter era."

"You're an old dreamer, Quartz," was the response. "I have at my back the true spirits of the camp and you and your red pard are as pigmies in our grip."

Gold Hat looking on saw something that escaped the eye of his companion.

He noticed that a face was at the window of Stella's house and that it was not the girl's.

Suddenly the door near that window opened and there stepped into the sunlight the tall figure of Roundabout Ruth!

She came toward the scene on the Plaza, and the doors of other cabins opening at the same time, poured out their inmates, bronzed men, who looked at Redhand ere they stepped forward.

"I told you so. Look at my men!" cried the desperado, with a sweep of his hand.

"Your men?" answered Roundabout Ruth. "Test them!"

A change swept over the face of the master sport. He walked toward the men who had halted at the fringe of the Square, and standing in front of the line, he cried, in a loud voice:

"You are for me, despite the hints of the enemy. We have toiled and fought together, and from nothing we built this camp in the mountain. I have been proud to call you friends and adherents, and to-day I am prouder than ever of you all."

Not a man moved, not a voice was lifted in reply.

Redhand's eye swept along the ranks and each face was inspected with a quick but complete scrutiny.

"Forward!" he cried.

Every man stood still.

Then for the first time he thought something wrong. He looked once more at the men and threw up the revolver, which his hand gripped, and his eye looked over the barrel into the dark faces in line.

"Forward!" he cried, once more.

As before, the line stood immovable.

Gold Hat, seeing all this, had sprung from the shanty, and his stop was alongside the man whose pard he was.

"It is mutiny," he said in a hoarse whisper at Redhand's ear. "It means that the accursed machinations of the boy and Roundabout Ruth have sown the camp with treason."

"I see it now, but, in the name of Heaven, what could have induced the men to desert us?"

"Where is the boy?"

"Ay, where is the young red? I would give my life for one shot at him."

"Forward—for the third and last time!" Redhand commanded to the line.

The men were looking into the muzzle of his six-shooter.

"This is treason of the rankest kind," roared Redhand. "This is duplicity that shall be atoned for in the blood of the traitors."

All at once a new voice was heard.

"For the new era, forward!" cried the new command.

The line took a sudden step toward Redhand. Thirty revolvers were lifted, and as many eyes looked over the shining barrels into the face of the two pards.

Redhand looked from them to the person who had given the last command.

Standing on the Plaza was the young Indian himself!

CHAPTER XVIII.

EVERYTHING MADE CLEAR.

It is night once more in the capital of the San Juan Mountains.

Myriads of stars look down upon it and the night-hawk flits above the cabins.

For once the doors of the Golden Gem are closed and the lights that were wont to shine over the card-sharps of the "city" are unlit.

If the reader could enter the camp he would not be disturbed, and no one would question his right to be there at any hour.

Far above the camp and on a spur of the lofty mountain that overlooks it, a group of people look down upon the deserted scene and one, a young girl, contemplates it with a good deal of sadness.

"I wish I knew where he was," she said with an audible sigh. "He kept his word and the secret is still his. Why did they let him get away when they had him in their grip and they had sworn to be true to you and Tom?"

She addressed a woman, who had been watching her some time with curiosity and eagerness.

"He had friends even among those who pretended to believe the boy's story of the murder, and they saved him. Redhand and his friend, Gold Hat, are fugitives, but they are hunted and will be so long as life lasts. You know that I am on the trail of the secret he carries, that I have yearned for years to fold to my heart once more the child he took from me as the eagle despoils the flock in the field. Yes, Stella, Colonel Redhand is at large but, with his friend, a hunted outlaw. His reign is broken and the last of the Silver Lassoes are hunted like the last pair of a pack of wolves."

"Let us go on. I am always calling up the happy days I had in Comet City. But look, what is that?"

A tongue of flame had leaped into the air far below them and the young girl started.

"There is another and still another!" she cried. "They have fired the camp!"

Stella and Roundabout Ruth stood spell-bound on the mountains and gazed upon the upstarting flames.

"Whose work is that?" the girl asked.

Roundabout Ruth smiled and touched Stella's arm.

"The den should be destroyed and the wolves should have no place to hide in when they come back," she replied. "As you say, we will go on, child."

They passed up the trail getting higher and higher and at last stood on a very elevated spot from whence they could see the fire-fiend as he licked up the cabins of Comet City.

"Farewell!" said Stella, waving her hand at the sight. "I shall never again stand in the shadow of the little shanty where some of the best days of my strange life were passed."

That was all. Roundabout Ruth leaned forward and looked into the girl's face, then turned away and walked from her.

Suddenly a cry was heard and then the coarse oath of a man.

Roundabout Ruth caught Stella and drew her back into the shadows.

"They have destroyed Comet City," said the voice. "Look, Gold Hat, they have blotted the old place from the face of the earth."

Stella drew closer to Roundabout Ruth and caught her arm.

"It is Redhand," she whispered. "The king of the mountain and his friend are yonder."

Roundabout Ruth looked up and caught sight of the dark figure that loomed between them and the starlit heavens.

Gently disengaging Stella's arms, she glared at them with the fury of a tigress and watched them while they stood where they had halted.

"Now," cried Redhand, "now if I could but see the author of all this—if I could stand face to face with the real author of our overthrow, I would be willing to let my deeds be my monument."

"You mean the boy, of course."

"I mean the woman!" Redhand bitterly answered.

At that moment Roundabout Ruth straightened in the path.

"I am here!" she said.

Both men turned instantly and Redhand half drew a revolver from his belt.

"I am here—I, the woman you have cursed!"

"It is Roundabout Ruth!" cried Gold Hat.

There was no response from the master sport. He looked into the face visible in the semi-darkness and seemed to throw the hate of a lifetime into the stare.

Ruth advanced a step.

"I am willing to meet you," said Redhand at last. "You have shed my blood before and now you want my life."

"Do you think so? Give up the secret and walk down the mountain free."

The lip of the outlaw curled proudly.

"What, go down yonder to the ruined camp and say that I surrendered to you?" he cried. "Never!"

The hand of Gold Hat touched his arm in the darkness and his voice was heard at his ear.

"Anything to get away now, colonel. We will turn on the she tiger by and by."

But, Redhand did not seem to hear.

"You know now who Major Cypher was," the woman went on. "You recall the night you lost the documents you were about to burn in Burro Bill's presence? I took them!"

"You, woman?"

"I robbed you. Those papers told the story of Major Cypher's past. He was your brother—the brother you deserted long ago on the Oregon trail, and left to perish among the wolves and savages. It was you—you who smote him with the silver lasso, and he died by your murderous hand!"

"It is false! There stands the murderer," and Redhand wheeling upon Gold Hat, covered the face of that worthy with his finger.

"So you turn on your pard of the white noose, do you?" sneered Roundabout Ruth. "You tell us that he tightened the lasso round the neck of Major Cypher, and that afterward both of you tried to fasten the crime upon Tonkaway Tom?"

There was no reply to this charge.

"The will left everything to the Indian boy, and you know it," she continued. "You know, too, that a certain map existed which was a key to the bonanza of the old Spaniards. Burro Bill obtained it by fraud, and paid the penalty for his infamy, for he fell down one of the walls of the mine, and was crushed to death. We have by accident discovered the mine, for Bill left the mouth of it open. Now, Redhand, are you going to keep the secret?"

The figure of the desperado seemed to grow taller in the light.

"Where is your companion?" he asked.

"Do you mean Tonkaway Tom?"

Tonkaway Tom, the Red Shadower.

BY JOSEPH E. RADGER, JR.

- 2 Yellowstone Jack; or, The Trapper.
- 48 Black John, the Road-Agent; or, The Outlaw's Retreat.
- 65 Hurricane Bill; or, Mustang Sam and His Pard.
- 119 Mustang Sam; or, The King of the Plains.
- 186 Night-Hawk Kit; or, The Daughter of the Ranch.
- 144 Dainty Lance, the Boy Sport.
- 151 Panther Paul; or, Dainty Lance to the Rescue.
- 160 The Black Giant; or, Dainty Lance in Jeopardy.
- 168 Deadly Dash; or, Fighting Fire with Fire.
- 181 The Boy Trappers; or, Dainty Lance on the War-Path.
- 203 The Boy Pards; or, Dainty Lance Unmasks.
- 211 Crooked Caley, the Caliban of Celestial City.
- 310 The Barranca Wolf; or, The Beautiful Decoy.
- 319 The Black Rider; or, The Horse-Thieves' League.
- 335 Old Double Flat; or, The Strange Guide.
- 355 The King of the Woods; or, Daniel Boone's Last Trail.
- 449 Kit Fox, the Border Boy Detective.
- 625 Chincapin Dan, the Boy Trapper.
- 677 Chincapin Dan's Second Trail.
- 688 Chincapin Dan's Home Stretch.
- 698 Old Crazy, the Man Without a Head.
- 708 Light-Heart Lute's Legacy.
- 718 Light-Heart Lute's Last Trail.
- 723 Silverblade, the Shoshone.
- 729 Silverblade, the Half-Blood; or, The Border Beagle at Bay.
- 739 Silverblade, the Hostile.
- 748 Silverblade, the Friendly; or, The Border Beagle's Boy Pard.

BY BUCKSKIN SAM (Major Sam. S. Hall.)

- 284 Old Rocky's "Boycot"; or, Benito, the Horse-Breaker.
- 246 Giant George; or, The Ang'l of the Range.
- 275 Arizona Jack; or, Giant George's Pard.
- 297 The Tarantula of Taos; or, Giant George's Revenge.
- 307 The Strange Pard; or, Little Ben's Death Hunt.
- 318 Ker-whoop, Ker-whoop; or, The Tarantula of Taos.
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"I mean Stella."

Before Roundabout Ruth could answer, Stella with a cry, sprung to the woman's side.

Colonel Redhand looked searchingly at the waif, and then turned to Roundabout Ruth.

"Why don't you kiss your child?" he asked.

The huntress recoiled, and then threw up her hands.

"My child?" she cried. "Do you tell me—"

"That your child is within reach of your arm, madame? Behold her! *The secret is out at last!*"

For a second, Stella and Roundabout Ruth stood apart; then, with a wild cry, they sprung into each other's arms, and Redhand turned to Gold Hat with a cynical smile.

The master sport watched the reunited for a moment and then strode away.

Gold Hat was about to follow when he was met by the master sport's eye.

"Yes, come on if you will, after the revelation," he said, and they went down the mountain, each carrying a drawn revolver in his hand.

Morning came, and a party of men headed by Tonkaway Tom came upon two figures lying in the sun.

The whole line fell back amazed, for scrutiny disclosed the identity of the pair. They were Redhand and Gold Hat, the last of the Silver Lassoes.

Everything about the men went to show that they had fought a duel alone, on the mountain, for Redhand had discovered that Major Cypher was his brother, and he knew that Gold Hat had taken his life.

The bodies of the two sports were buried side by side on the mountain and soon afterward the little party joined Roundabout Ruth and Stella.

The pards of the late camp who had heard from Tonkaway enough to turn them against the man whom they had served so long, separated. Some went back to rebuild Comet City, while others turned their faces in another direction.

Tonkaway Tom began to work the old mine in which Burro Bill had lost his life, but the little camp which grew up around it knew nothing of the Silver Lassoes, and Stella, and her mother—whose child-hunt had ended—were far away, where, in time, the girl became the happy wife of her lover, Morris Mayne.

Old Quartz did not desert the Indian boy, but, clinging to his fortunes, became rich in time, while Tonkaway Tom is known to-day as "the Red Nabob of the Southwest."

THE END.

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